

HIRO AINANA

ILLUSTRATION BY
SHRI

DEATH MARCH
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD
RHAPSODY 16







DEATH MARCH 16
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY





ARISA

A former princess of the Kuvork Kingdom. She was Japanese in her previous life.

SATOU

A twenty-nine-year-old programmer who has been transported to a parallel universe.



Offering project ideas to the Echigoya Company?!

“Maybe you could offer some other convenient items, too?”

Oh, I know! Why not collect product suggestions from the public? Like an idea contest!”

DEATH MARCH
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD Rhapsody

16

★ ★ ★
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YEN
FUN

NEW YORK

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Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 16

Hiro Ainana

Translation by Jenny McKeon

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The Royal Capital

“Satou here. A little bit of trouble at your destination is part of the fun of traveling, but that doesn’t mean I enjoy getting caught in the middle of various issues. Too much excitement makes me feel like I should stop in at a shrine and request an exorcism.”

“I am Zef Juleburg the Unstoppable, First Seat of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen. I have come to request a duel with you, Sir Pendragon the Untouchable!”

The gray-haired knight made this alarming proclamation with a commanding expression.

He held a magic spear with a white handle and a bluish adamantite-alloy spearhead; it was clear from the ornamentation and magical imbuelement—which were at once both elegant and grand—that it was the work of a fine alchemist and engraver.

He seemed eager to fight, but unfortunately I didn’t feel the same way.

Yes, I accepted the Fairy Sword that one of my companions handed to me from behind, but that didn’t mean I intended to draw it.

I was still exhausted from catching those terrorists in the act of trying to assassinate Duke Vistall and from landing the airship safely in lieu of the wounded captain and crew.

Attempting to hint as much, I pointedly looked back at the airship where it had emergency-landed, but Sir Zef Juleburg took one quick glance and ignored the hint completely.

“Here I come!” he said.

Without waiting for my answer, Sir Juleburg dismounted from his horse and swiftly charged toward me.

Yikes!

On pure reflex, I dodged the sudden attack by a hair.

When cheers rose from the crowd around us, I realized my mistake, but by then it was too late.

I couldn't very well let his barrage of strikes hit me on purpose, although I at least protested by dodging them dramatically instead of by a hair's breadth.

"Very impressive. Now I understand why Helmina kept recommending you at every opportunity," he said.

Looking past Sir Juleburg, I saw the Fifth Seat of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, the gun user, Lady Helmina, grinning eagerly.

I knew it. So you were to blame for all this...

"Now, draw your sword. Or is that fancy weapon at your waist just for show?"

Sorry, but yes, it is.

At this point, not drawing my sword would seem like an insult to Sir Juleburg. I decided to spar with him for a little while, then pick a good time to lose so spectacularly that he would never try to get me to fight him again.

As soon as I drew my sword, the peanut gallery surrounding us let out gasps of admiration.

Because of my beautiful Fairy Sword, of course, not because of me.

"So you're finally rising to the challenge, are you? Then I'll let you have the first move. Come at me, Pendr—"

"Hey! Stop, stop!"

A middle-aged man with stern features and a hawklike nose jumped in front of Baronet Jelil as the latter readied his spear. It was Duke Vistall, the man who had almost been assassinated by employees of his disowned eldest son on the way here.

"Do you not see this disaster?! His Majesty's airship was attacked, and yours truly, a noble leader of the kingdom, was nearly assassinated! Stop playing around like this and go chase the criminals who ran off with my Holy Ch—I mean, my daughter!"

Spittle flew from the duke's mouth as he shouted.

Hmm? What was he about to say instead of "daughter"?

Since she's a noble's kid, maybe she has a fancy title like "Holy Child" or something.

"Pssst, master."

The young girl, Arisa, tugged on my sleeve from behind me, her lilac hair hidden by a blond wig.

"If the duke's daughter has been kidnapped, isn't this Team Pendragon's time to shine?"

She batted her eyes up at me hopefully.

"Let's-a gooo...?"

"Scrambled eggs, sir!"

Tama, a laid-back girl with short white hair and cat ears and a tail, and Pochi, an energetic girl with a brown bob and dog ears and a tail, raised their fists in agreement next to Arisa.

Pochi was obsessed with eating, so it was nothing new for her to mix up the emergency "scramble" maneuver with "scrambled eggs." I could just correct her later.

"Master, is a larva in danger?"

The buxom blond, Nana, ever the guardian to small children, spoke up in a stern voice, despite her usual lack of expression.

As a magical man-made homunculus, she appeared to be around high school age but was actually still less than one year old.

"Well, actually..."

I had Arisa use the Space Magic spell Tactical Talk so I could convey information only to the rest of my group.

Right before the internal strife in Vistall Duchy culminated in the airship attack incident, the child in question—Duke Vistall's youngest daughter, Somienna—along with her mother, the duke's first wife, escaped from danger

alongside several guards on a lifeboat.

Afraid she was being kidnapped, I checked things out with the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance right away, but while young Somienna herself looked confused, her mother was behaving as if it was all according to plan.

Thus, I assumed that she was on the side of the count's eldest son, Torriel, who was presumed to be the mastermind behind the attack.

"I see... Thank goodness."

Lulu, a girl so beautiful that you could lose your grasp on reality just by staring at her, patted her chest in relief that it wasn't a kidnapping.

The contrast between the pure-white dress that reflected her kind nature and the jet-black hair that glimmered in the sunlight only enhanced her Japanese-style beauty.

"Master?"

Liza, a young woman from the orangescale tribe with scales near her wrists and neck, called out to me urgently.

She had kept her guard up even while we were casually conversing, holding her beloved Magic Cricket Spear and keeping a close eye on Sir Juleburg of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen.

"Sir Pendragon, forgive me. I know I am the one who requested a sparring match, but I must request a postponement for now."

Baronet Jelil apologized to me grimly.

I would really prefer to call it off altogether than "postpone" it, though.

"This is no time to be talking to a lowly hereditary knight—"

"I must now go recover the stolen Holy Chalice. I will send an emissary to you in the next few days; I hope you will show me what you're truly made of then."

With that, Sir Juleburg vanished beyond the crowd, with his Holy Knights and fellow Shiga Eight Swordsmen ally, Lady Helmina, in tow.

That seemed to satisfy Duke Vistall, who returned to where his wives were waiting.

The Scarlet Nobleman, Baronet Jelil, and his comrades from the Red Dragon's Roar, too, had produced horses and went chasing after Sir Juleburg and the others.

"...Holy Chalice?"

The last member of my group, an elf girl named Mia with light-blue hair done up in pigtails, repeated Sir Juleburg's words quietly.

Her slightly pointed ears, an elf's chief identifier, were hidden beneath a simple hood.

"I wonder what that's about?"

Even as I responded to Mia, I realized that the words Duke Vistall had begun to say when declaring that his daughter had been stolen were probably "Holy Chalice."

"Maybe it's an artifact that can use Prayer Magic or something!"

I knew exactly where Arisa's mind had wandered upon hearing the word *chalice*, so I scolded her for jumping straight to thoughts of anime.

Searching the map, I found that several of them existed in the royal capital, including in a treasure room beneath the royal castle. The detailed information informed me that it was an artifact that collected miasma from its surroundings.

When I didn't get any hits outside the royal capital, I tried searching for the name of Duke Vistall's youngest daughter, Somienna, instead.

They're not as far away as I thought.

They hadn't moved very far from the area where the lifeboat took off.

There was no item called a Holy Chalice in her vicinity. Since Somienna had the "Item Box" skill, it was almost certainly stored away in there.

More importantly, I had discovered something I couldn't ignore while looking for her.

"Sorry, Mia, but could you summon some sylphs? Two—no, three of them, please."

"Mm. Got it."

Without asking for the reason, Mia began using the Spirit Magic spell Create Wind Spirit.

“Is something up?” Arisa asked me quietly.

Since I still had Tactical Talk enabled, I heard her voice both through that and my “Keen Hearing” skill.

“Yeah...”

By the time I was done explaining, Mia’s Spirit Magic had summoned the three sylphs.

They looked like semitransparent women. The crowd exclaimed when they appeared, but I ignored them, more concerned with mediating another urgent problem.

“We’ll be back, I boldly declare.”

“Go, sylphs.”

The sylphs carried Nana, Mia, and me away, weaving between trees to avoid being seen. Then they lifted us into the air some distance away from the main road, flying toward the direction of Labyrinth City.



““““Master!””””

Seven identical faces called out to me in perfect unison.

It was Nana’s sisters and fellow homunculi: Number 1 through Number 6, along with Number 8.

They once served the Undead King, Zen, but registered me as their owner when he passed on and started calling me “master” like Nana.

“Mia and I are here, too, I declare.”

Nana looked as expressionless as ever, although there was a slightly pouty tone to her voice.

““““Number 7!””””

“My name is Nana now, I correct.”

“Nana,” her sisters affirmed in response to her complaint. Then they continued, “““Princess!”””

“Not princess.” Mia strongly objected to the title they’d referred to her by when she was being held captive in the Cradle by Zen. “Mia.”

“““Lady Mia!”””

Mia nodded at this, looking satisfied.

“Erm, do you know these young ladies?”

“Yes, and I’m terribly sorry for the trouble they’ve caused you.”

I bowed my head to the hesitant middle-aged merchant.

Behind him were several crashed carriages, horses lying down and foaming at the mouth, and a great deal of luggage scattered all over the ground. The overturned carriages and piles of luggage were blocking the road.

Beyond all this, at the edge of a forest, was a giant creature that looked like a cross between a crab and a spider, sitting with its legs drawn inward. It was a level-30 monster called a long-legged spider crab, which Number 8 had trained and made into a mount.

Judging by the current state of things, the sisters must have ridden the long-legged spider crab out of the forest and appeared in front of the merchant and company as they were traveling along the road; the horses and coachmen must have panicked and tried to stop or change directions, resulting in this chaotic mess.

I had noticed this situation as I was investigating the whereabouts of Duke Vistall’s youngest daughter, Somienna, on the map, and I’d come running in a hurry to help.

“I will explain the situation to master. You take charge of the repair work, Number 2.”

Number 2 nodded at the directive from Number 1 and set about cleaning up.

“Nana, help your sisters with the cleanup, please.”

“Yes, master.”

Nana walked lightly toward her sisters.

After a brief explanation from Number 1 and an introduction to the merchant in question, I told him I would pay for all the damage the sisters had caused.

“Sir Pendragon? Are you by any chance related to the ‘Pirate Hunter’ Liquor Marquis Pendragon?”

“I wasn’t aware of the ‘Pirate Hunter’ nickname, but yes, I am a Liquor Marquis in the Kingdom of Sorcery, Lalagi.”

When we were traveling on the sugar route in the southern islands, I’d located pirates on the map and implemented a search-and-destroy protocol to ensure that the Dragonpen Trading Company, which I’d helped fund, could sail safely.

That must be how I wound up with this new nickname.

“I thought as much! You may not remember him, but my uncle is the captain of a merchant ship. You saved his life and several other friends of mine as well.”

He gave me the names of the people I’d apparently saved, and sure enough, I got matching results when I searched those names in the list of rescued people in my networking tab’s memo pad.

I’ve saved so many people in the sugar route that I don’t remember most of them.

“What a coincidence,” I said vaguely, and I moved on to the subject of compensation.

“There’s no need to reimburse me. Our goods are all packed very thoroughly, and none of the carriages have broken axels,” he rattled off eagerly. “Truly, it must be fate that I was able to meet the person who saved my uncle and friends. We’ll be staying in the capital until the new year—please come see us if you need anything. I’m afraid I can’t give it to you for free, but we’ll certainly give you the deepest discounts we can!”

It didn’t seem like he was going to accept payment for the damages.

Since his trading company dealt in goods from the sugar route, he probably had some interesting items for sale. I figured I would just buy a bunch of things

from him to make up for the likely damage costs with the resulting profit.

““““Ooooooh!””””

Hearing a commotion from the direction of Nana and her sisters, I excused myself from my conversation with the middle-aged merchant and turned toward them.

The merchants and other travelers who'd been held up by the mess in the road were exclaiming in surprise as they watched the group of homunculi righting the fallen carriages.

It looked like they should have been able to clear the road quickly enough without help from me or from Mia's magic.

Still, I didn't want to just stand around while they worked, so I handed my formal coat off to Mia and went to help the middle-aged merchant inspect the carriages and goods.

“Hey now! What fools dare block the road?! Move your carriages aside and make way already!”

I heard an angry voice from somewhere beyond the traffic jam on the road.

Alarming enough, a young knight in military garb was waving his unsheathed sword and threatening people as he made his way toward us.

It was one of the terrorists who had taken Duke Vistall's daughter into custody.

Since I'd been looking for them in the first place when I happened to spot Nana's sisters, it wasn't too surprising that they were nearby.

“My apologies, Sir Knight. We'll have them all moving again by the fourth cycle, if you would be so kind as to wait just a little longer, please. It's not much, but allow me to offer these as an apology—”

“You dare mock me, lowlife?!”

Even as the middle-aged merchant held up a money pouch as an apology, the furious knight began to swing his sword at the man.

You think I'd let that happen?

I knocked the sword aside with a quick palm strike.

“You insolent cur!”

Now bright red, the knight slashed his sword toward me instead. I calmly grabbed his arm, yanked him off his horse, and pinned him to the ground.

“What do you think you’re doing?! Do you not see the family crest of Duke Vistall?! If you turn your sword on us, you are declaring rebellion against the house of Duke Vistall!”

A young noble in somewhat fancy military garb appeared with two knights in tow, forcing the crowd and carriages imperiously to the side of the road. Behind him was a plain carriage that was painted black.

It seemed a little outrageous for someone who had plotted to assassinate Duke Vistall to turn around and try to hide behind his name, though.

And while he appeared to have forgotten, the Vistall crest was nowhere to be seen on his carriage or his knights’ mantles. He must have been accustomed to spewing this nonsense.

“Aah! You were on the airship!”

A little girl leaned out the window of the carriage and pointed at me—none other than Miss Somienna, Duke Vistall’s youngest daughter.

Just as I’d noted when they’d initially escaped, she didn’t appear to be restrained or otherwise trapped.

“This man was on that airship?! Then you must be pursuers!”

His haughty pretense gone, the young noble shrieked in alarm, and the knights around him drew their swords menacingly.

“Somienna! Stay inside!”

“But, Mother—”

An older woman, the duke’s first wife, pulled Miss Somienna back into the carriage in a hurry.

“The duke cannot know about us! We’ll silence all of you here and now!”

On hearing this, the people around us scattered, fleeing into the forest.

This man intended to kill everyone here just to keep them quiet.

That was certainly a typical terrorist mindset, but I wasn't going to let it slide.

"Nana, you take the left half. Mia, protect the bystanders from magic attacks."

"Yes, master."

"Mm, got it. ■■■■■"

Still in formal dresses, Nana and Mia jumped into action.

""""DIE!""""

Nana and I knocked out the attacking knights one after another.

While I was using just my palm, Nana used her Shield-generating bracelet and a "One-Handed Sword" from her Fairy Pack to knock the men out.

The sword was one thing, but I had to feel a little bad for the guys getting taken down by a shield in the shape of a yellow chick.

"Master, let us help, too."

"No, you protect the merchants and the others with Mia, please."

I sent Number 1 and company back to the rear.

Although the homunculi could probably take on multiple enemies like this, the enemy commander and a few of the others were around level 30, so it was possible they'd get seriously wounded in the process.

Just to be safe, I wanted to keep them out of the battle if possible.

Besides...

"You who would bathe the streets of Shiga Kingdom with blood! We are the noble Third Regiment of Knights, the patrollers of the capital! Put away your swords at once, or you will be considered bandits and executed!"

...I had noticed on my radar that the highway guards were approaching.

The Third Regiment appeared to be quite skillful: They protected the merchants and other civilians while steadily incapacitating the terrorist knights.

"Looks like the knights of the royal capital are seriously skilled."

“Mm. Strong.”

Considering that most of them were only in their 20s level-wise, even if they did have the advantage of numbers, it was impressive that they were dominating against a group that included a knight over level 30. It was probably only a matter of time until they had suppressed all the terrorists.

“Grrr... So this is as far as we go?!”

The young nobleman in the military outfit groaned, opened the door of the carriage, and sent the duke’s wife and youngest daughter to flee on horseback.

Their two horses went down a slope on the left side of the road.

“Two horses getting away! Squad Two, after them!”

Hearing the wife and daughter scream, the commander of the patrolling knights noticed them escaping and sent part of the squadron to chase them down.

“Lady Tohomaenna!” the lady knight on the horse cried out.

The duke’s first wife, who was riding with her, had fallen off. According to my map information, she’d broken her neck in the fall and was on the verge of death.

“Mother! Turn back, my mother fell!”

“No, Lady Somienna! We must at least get you to Lord Torriel, or our comrades will have died in vain on the airship.”

I could faintly hear the young noble and the duke’s daughter from far away.

Clearly, the youngest daughter—no, the Holy Chalice—was more important to them than her mother’s life.

Even the lady knight who’d been riding with the mother wasn’t stopping to check on the fallen woman, instead swinging her sword to try to hinder their pursuers.

“...People in this world ought to value others’ lives more,” I murmured.

“Satou?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

Patting Mia on the head, I slid down the steep slope and ran over to the fallen woman.

The lady knight had already been pinned by one of the knights from the regiment, so I rushed past them and used Healing Magic on the duke's wife, who was breathing as if through a pipe.

Just before the spell went into effect, I used my psychokinesis-like spell Magic Hand to adjust the woman's neck to the proper position so that her bones wouldn't heal at a strange angle.

"Phew, that should do it. Now..."

I picked up the unconscious woman and carried her back to the main highway, where I handed her off to the patrolling knights to look after her.

Once we had gotten the merchants' carriages back into working order, I checked the map and saw that the young noble with the duke's daughter was still playing chase with the squadron.

I wasn't about to run out to help them—I'm not interested in stepping into a minefield of my own making.

Besides, the patrolling knights had a Wind Magic user helping another squad navigate to chase after them as well. Even if I didn't get involved, it was probably only a matter of time.

"Well, if you'll excuse us, then."

"Please be sure to visit us. Our shop is at 30 Coin Street."

"Yes, I certainly will!"

With that promise to the merchant, we took off into the sky with the help of Mia's sylphs.

"Master! We're flying, I declare!"

Number 8 and Nana's other sisters began exclaiming in surprise. Most of the homunculi didn't express much emotion, but the mood swings of Number 8 were quite dramatic.

As for the long-legged spider crab that had started the whole affair, I had

Number 8 send it to a far-off mountainside.



“Welcome back, master. Did you take care of things over there?”

“Yes, it’s all been resolved.”

On our way back, some birdfolk soldiers and Wyvern Knights demanded identification from us, but we easily proved our innocence between my nobility papers, mithril badges, and Mia’s pointed elf ears.

It had been less than an hour since we left; everyone but Duke Vistall and company were still where we’d left them. It looked like the carriages hadn’t come to pick everyone up yet.

“Glad to see Nana’s sisters are doing well, too.”

“We have finally returned to the service of our master. From now on, we seven shall serve below Lady Mia and our other seniors like Number 7—that is, Nana—to devote ourselves to working for our master.”

Unlike Nana, Number 1 spoke quite smoothly.

“Were you able to visit the grave?”

“Yes, we visited our former master’s wife’s grave and buried his mementos there.”

While our group and Nana’s sisters were chatting, some of the peanut gallery started commenting among themselves about the identical sisters: “Even more shieldmaidens?” “What’s he gonna do with eight of them, fight a demon lord’s army?!” “C’mon, let me have one!” and so on. They must have gotten pretty bored of waiting by this point.

Once we had all exchanged greetings, Arisa turned to me. “So, master, are we going to keep waiting here?”

“Hmm...” Judging by the number of people waiting for a ride, it was doubtful that our turn would come anytime soon. “It’s not really that far. Why don’t we just walk?”

Besides, there were plenty of horse-drawn cabs along the way, so we could probably get a ride partway there.

“Is that all right with you, Lady Karina?”

At that, Baron Muno’s second daughter flipped her luxurious blond hair over her shoulder.

“But of course.”

Her trademark curls bounced, along with her other uniquely enormous assets.

My vision nearly got sucked in, but I used all of my willpower to resist.

“Tama’s fine, too...?”

“Pochi’s okay, too, of course, sir.”

Tama and Pochi, who were being held up like dolls by Number 6 and Number 8, chimed in cheerfully after Karina.

Nana’s sisters seemed to be just as fond of children as she was; the pair looked thrilled to be holding the animal-eared duo. Number 5 attempted to do the same with Mia but was met with a short “no” and stood there looking dejected.

“All right, let’s get going.”

I led everyone toward the gate to the royal capital.

Including Nana’s sisters, we had a big group of nineteen people total.

Since there were so many of us, it took a considerable amount of time to make our way past all the nosy onlookers, whose numbers had multiplied while I was off regrouping with the homunculi sisters.

Once we finally passed that crowd, we arrived at the royal capital in no time.

“Biiig...?”

“It’s way bigger than the Labyrinth City gate, sir!”

Gazing up at the enormous gate that bore a vague resemblance to the Arc de Triomphe, Tama and Pochi started getting excited, as did the rest of the group.

The gate seemed to be designed to boast of the culture and wealth of the vast Shiga Kingdom. There were elaborate carvings on it, as well as several hidden runelike circuits in the shadows.

“Line.”

“I suppose that’s to be expected when you’re entering the capital of a big kingdom.”

Mia and Arisa grumbled when they saw the line outside the gate.

We ignored the lines for merchants and ordinary citizens, heading to the nobles’ line, which consisted of fancy carriages. By the time we took our place, most of the carriages had already gone through, and our turn came around quickly.

“This is the nobles’ line. If you belong here, please show me the proof.”

The knight at the gate had a tense voice.

“Wow, he’s got a bably voice.”

“Babyyyy...?”

“It’s better to let baby boars grow up big before you hunt them so you get more meat, sir.”

The guard’s harsh expression softened for just a moment when he heard Arisa and the other kids talking behind me.

“I am Satou Pendragon, vassal and hereditary knight of the Muno Barony. This young woman is Baron Muno’s daughter, Lady Karina Muno.”

As I introduced myself, I showed the man my noble papers and Karina’s papers from her lady-in-waiting, Pina.

“My apologies, but I’ll have to inspect these.”

The knight looked at the papers and at each of us in turn.

He had the “Analyze” skill, so he was probably making sure we were the real deal.

“Forgive my rudeness, Lady Muno. Sir Pendragon, if it would not be too much trouble, might I ask why nobles such as yourselves are not riding in a carriage?”

Ohhh, that’s why the inspection was so thorough.

“We were on the airship that made an emergency landing here earlier. As no

one came to pick us up, we decided to walk and enjoy the view of the capital, and perhaps pick up a cab along the way.”

That response seemed to satisfy him; he apologized that he couldn’t provide a carriage and let us through.

“...Hmm?”

Once we passed through the gate, Arisa rubbed her eyes and blinked a few times.

“What’s up?”

“I thought I saw something strange next to the castle there...”

“Oh, yeah. It’s a cherry blossom tree.”

According to Eluterina, the general manager of the Echigoya Company, it was a famous tree known as the “Royal Sakura” that started blooming around this time every year.

“The same size as the castle?”

“It’s not that surprising, is it?”

In our old world, this would be the stuff of fiction, but this world had Mountain-Trees and even the World Trees that stretched into outer space. A tree around the size of a castle wasn’t too unusual.

“Mm, normal.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Mia nodded sagely. Arisa seemed to remember the existence of those giant trees and nodded as well, but she still had a strange expression.

“So even though it’s that big, it’s not the Unwithering Sakura Tree, huh?”

“Yeah, I don’t think making a wish under this tree will guarantee the wish comes true.”

Arisa was clearly thinking of a sakura tree from a famous video game series, so I countered with my memories of the subject.

“That’s too bad.” Arisa grinned and turned the subject back to reality.

“So there are sakura trees in this world, too.”

“I hear the ancestral king Yamato got them from the elves.”

“The ancestral king again...? It’s like the legends of Kukai the monk.”

Arisa seemed wary of believing these legends.

“Now, now. I heard the cherry blossoms bloom in the royal capital around the new year—we should all come have a flower-viewing party when they’re in full bloom.”

“Ooh, nice! You should make *sakura mochi*!”

“Sure,” I agreed, to Arisa’s excitement.

As Arisa explained flower-viewing parties to the other kids and I listened fondly, Lady Karina’s lady-in-waiting, Pina, approached me.

“Sir Knight, will we be going straight to the baron’s home?”

“Yes, that was the plan.” I nodded.

We now had twice as many people as intended, though. I planned to first find out if we could all stay at the baron’s home, and find an inn if not.

“Master, I see a carriage without a horse, I declare.”

Number 8 tugged on my sleeve urgently. Following her gaze, I saw a carriage that looked like a nineteenth-century automobile.

“That’s a golem carriage.”

The carriages themselves were automated golems; I’d seen a few in Ougoch Duchy.

There were many variations of this kind of vehicle. The one we used for the parade in Labyrinth City was a golem carriage. From what the nobles in Labyrinth City told me, most people considered the latter to be more refined and the former more radical.

“Master, the flowers on the balconies are pretty, I report.”

Number 8 latched on to my arm and pointed up at the flowers decorating the houses along the road. She seemed to be friendlier than the other homunculi.

“Guilty?”

“Hmm, it’s on the fence.”

Mia and Arisa were whispering among themselves off to one side.

“Her boobs are small, so I’d say she’s presumed innocent.”

“Mm. Agreed.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Number 8, you are inconveniencing master, I report,” Nana said.

Number 8 looked up at me in surprise. “Master, am I an inconvenience?”

“Not at all.”

Although it is a little hard to walk like this.

I kept that part to myself, and Number 8 shot Nana a look with a self-satisfied huff. She had the same blank expression as Nana, but I’m sure that was her version of a smug smirk.

So as to avoid blocking the road, we decided to walk in pairs.

“There are a lot of pedestrians, since it’s a capital city and all.”

“Mm, agreed.”

The main street from the west gate was wide enough for four carriages, but since there were no signals or signs, traffic sometimes got congested at intersections and busy thoroughfares. Fortunately, there weren’t nearly as many carriages coming and going as cars on a modern-day road. There were sidewalks on either side, but many people were walking right in the road.

“It appears to be primarily humans here.”

As Liza watched the pedestrians passing, she produced a few cloaks from her Fairy Pack to cover up her tail and orange scales, as well as Tama’s and Pochi’s ears and tails.

According to the information on my map, the royal capital was 80 percent human. The remaining 20 percent were primarily scalefolk or beastfolk, while there were fewer than three hundred fairy races all told.

“Master, is there discrimination toward nonhuman races in the royal capital, too?” Lulu asked.

“I think it depends. Apparently there are beastfolk merchants and ambassadors from nonhuman countries.” I remembered what I’d heard from Labyrinth City nobles and Echigoya executives as I responded. “But I imagine it’s not as bad as in the northern parts of the Shiga Kingdom.”

In Seiryuu City, where I first met the beastfolk girls, most demi-human races except some fairies were only allowed to exist as slaves.

“There are lots of different kinds of carriages, too.”

“Yes, and there are other beasts pulling carriages and carts besides horses, like the runosaurs and dullalkosaurs we saw in the old capital.”

Lulu and Liza were talking among themselves.

“Gorgeooous...”

“Very amazing carriage, sir!”

An extravagant three-tier carriage passed us from behind. It was displaying the national flag of the Shiga Kingdom, with the crest of the Ministry of Labyrinth Resources on the side.

“Wow, that seems excessive.”

Arisa raised her eyebrows at the ten-odd kingdom knights who were guarding the carriage.

“It is an official kingdom carriage. I think that’s a normal amount of guards.”

“Hmm, you think so.”

Finally, my knowledge of heraldry came in handy.

“Master, over there! A huge turtle is pulling a cart, I declare!”

Number 8 hopped up and down, pointing at a giant tortoise lumbering down the street with a six-wheel cart in tow.

“I’m surprised it doesn’t dent the cobblestones with all that weight,” Arisa remarked.

“Maybe it’s reinforced with Earth Magic?” I replied.

According to my AR display, that was part of a delegation from the leprechaun kingdom.

Leprechauns had brown skin and, like most fairy races, were short-statured with slightly pointed ears. Though they weren’t as rare as elves, it was still unusual to see the adventure-and prank-loving leprechauns in human territory.

As we continued making our way through the main street of the capital, someone called out to me.

“Sir Pendragon!”

I recognized the person calling to me from a carriage window. It was one of the top staff from the explorers’ guild in Labyrinth City Celivera, a heavy drinker who always joined drinking parties with the guildmaster and me.

These guild employees had come on the same airship as we had to deliver the floormaster spoils to the king.

“The nobles’ quarters are some distance away, and there aren’t many cabs in this area. Would you like a ride at least partway?”

“I truly appreciate the offer, but we’ve got a big group here...”

“That’s all right. There are two more carriages behind us, and we’d feel safer having mithril adventurers like yourselves along with us.”

“Ah, right.” I lowered my voice. “You don’t have any knights...”

“Yes, did you see the Ministry of Labyrinth Resources carriage pass before we did? That was a decoy.”

Come to think of it, the Labyrinth City explorers’ guild was an official organization under the management of the Ministry of Labyrinth Resources.

“Our plan is to quietly make our way to the royal castle while any ruffians are distracted by that one.”

They were high level themselves, and the guild employees serving as guards were hardened former adventurers, but it still didn’t quite seem like enough.

Since I was a little worried, I agreed that we should ride with them while also

serving as guards.

We wouldn't all fit in one carriage, of course. I rode in the first carriage with Pochi, Tama, Lady Karina, and Pina. The rest of my group and Lady Karina's guardian maids rode in the second carriage. Nana and her sisters were in the third.

The second and third carriages were box-shaped carriages with no roof, basically cargo carriages, which is why I prioritized Lady Karina for the first one.

"Are you all headed to the royal castle?"

"The other two carts are carrying cores, so technically they're stopping outside the second castle wall at the core storage warehouse, but yes."

According to the executive staff member, he and two other employees with the "Item Box" skill were storing the most valuable spoils from the floormasters in their Item Boxes, while the rest were carried in high-capacity Magic Bags provided by the royal family.

The luggage piled on the carriage roofs and floors was mostly just for decoy purposes.

The luggage even contained some junky magic tools in case someone tried to magically search them.

"Mew!"

Curled up on my lap, Tama suddenly perked up her ears.

At the same time, a red dot appeared on my radar.

"Is something wrong?" the employee asked, noticing my change in expression.

"Looks like some thieves went after the decoy."

I pointed at a pillar of white smoke rising up ahead.

According to my radar information, around thirty members of a criminal guild were attacking the Ministry of Labyrinth Resources carriage.

They seemed to plan to steal the goods from the carriage under cover of smoke bombs.

Gah...

As the smoke spread, I heard a boom and saw a burst of fire.

A mage from the criminal guild, standing on the roof of a three-story building near the site of the attack, had used the Fire Magic spell Fire Circle on the ground.

Between the smoke and the circle of flames, the knights on the ground couldn't seem to locate the mage.

"Crazypaaants..."

"Criminals in the royal capital are really advanced."

Even in violent Labyrinth City, no one would try something like this.

"No... We hardly ever have idiots who try something this bold."

So it was rare even in the royal capital, too.

At this rate, people would definitely get injured by the attack magic, so I decided to intervene just a little.

"Tama?"

"Aye!"

I held out my hand, and Tama immediately produced a rock from her Fairy Pack and placed it in my palm, as if reading my mind. It was the perfect size for throwing.

I leaned out the carriage window and tossed it with just my arm strength, holding back so it wouldn't be lethal. The rock hit the mage squarely in the stomach and knocked him out immediately.

I was surprised, however, when he toppled off the roof from the impact. But at least he hit every balcony and cloth overhang on the way down, ensuring that the impact didn't kill him.

That was like a stunt from an old kung-fu movie, I thought foolishly, feeling secretly relieved that I hadn't killed someone.

Of course, if it really came down to it, I would've used my ever-present Magic Hand to slow his fall.

...Geh!

The red dot indicating the criminal guild mage abruptly vanished.

He hadn't belatedly been killed by the fall—a nearby royal knight had stabbed him with a sword.

Wow, no mercy...

"Master?"

Arisa and the others came up from the cart behind us, having noticed the situation.

"I don't think we'll need to get involved."

Even as I spoke, someone used Wind Magic to blow away the white smoke covering the area.

As soon as the blinding smoke was cleared away, the royal knights began their counterattack against the criminal guild.

In seconds, blood was spraying in all directions like something out of a splatter film. Even with three times the number of people, the criminals couldn't make up for the difference in level and battle experience. Some of them tried to run away, but they were chased and cut down in seconds.

I automatically turned away; I'm not good with this kind of brutality.

"It's over..."

"They killed all the bad guys, sir."

Before long, the attackers had been completely wiped out.

When I turned back, I saw that some city guards had arrived and were dragging the criminals' corpses off to the side of the road, while the Ministry of Labyrinth Resources carriage and their royal guards were getting ready to keep moving.

"Looks like they took care of things. Let's keep moving, too."

The carriage started moving again not long after the executive spoke.

When I saw a few innocent bystanders who'd been harmed in the process, I

gave them some watered-down lesser potions.

Fortunately, there weren't any more incidents like that one. The carriages brought us to the street leading to the area where the lesser nobles' mansions stood; from there, we were able to take a cab to Baron Muno's mansion in the royal capital.

"Pretty snug for a baron's mansion, isn't it?"

Just as Arisa said, Baron Muno's royal capital home was a little small.

Of course, that was just relative to the idea of a lord's manor. It was a fairly standard size for a normal baron's home, and certainly luxurious by the standards of a modern Japanese home.

"Sir Knight!"

A familiar-looking maid who was working in the garden spotted me and came running over.

Hearing her, the other maids appeared from inside the mansion, too.

""""Welcome home, Sir Pendragon!"""" they chorused.

I appreciated their warm welcome, but...

"Girls! Where's your greeting for Lady Karina?!"

"Ack! Miss Pina!"

Pina flew into a rage at them for neglecting to greet their actual master.

Lady Karina herself was chatting with Tama and Pochi about the appearance of the mansion and didn't seem to have noticed the perceived insult.

""""Welcome home, Lady Karina.""""

As the maids greeted her in another chorus, Lady Karina stepped forward, flipping back her glamorous golden curls and puffing out her chest.

"Thank you for the welcome!" she declared. "It's a pleasure to be here!"

Hopefully now we could finally relax.

The Baron's Mansion

“Satou here. When I was traveling overseas on a budget, I sometimes wasn’t able to stay in the hotels I was planning on using. You can’t exactly camp out in less-than-safe countries, so I wound up desperately searching for a hotel.”

“I didn’t know Nana had eight siblings.”

“Yes, we happened to run into them near the royal capital.”

I recognized the head of the five maids who’d been stationed at the baron’s royal capital mansion, but I didn’t remember her name until it showed in the AR display.

“Since we’ve got far more people than I planned for, we were thinking about getting rooms at an inn instead.”

“Wh-whaaat?!”

“But you must stay here, Sir Knight!”

“Ma’am! We’ll empty out our room. Let them stay there!”

As soon as I mentioned getting a hotel, the maids who were standing against the wall all jumped up and started begging the head maid.

“You sure are popular here, master. You haven’t laid a hand on the maids, have you?”

“Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous.”

I pushed Arisa’s forehead away as she leaned toward me.

“But your room is a six-person servants’ room, girls. It would be rude to have our guests stay there, and where would you sleep in the meantime?”

“We can sleep in the hallway or the shed!”

“Or the floor of the kitchen or the dining room!”

“So please, ma’am! Get Sir Knight to stay here!”

The maids pressed closer to their boss.

Even the stern head maid seemed taken aback by their fervor.

“Sir Knight, Sir Knight...,” Erina whispered to me from behind. “Those girls are really just after your cooking. So go ahead and steal their room.”

“I’m with Ms. Erina,” added Ms. Newbie. “The maids can stay with Pina and the rest of us, if you wouldn’t mind staying here.”

Honestly, I would’ve preferred to dive right into bed without doing any cooking after the long day, but I couldn’t disappoint them when they had such high hopes.

“I’ll take you up on your kind offer for tonight, then.”

“Really? Then please wait a moment while we prepare the room.”

“Oh, and, ma’am...” I stopped the head maid as she was starting to give orders. “If I can get the head chef’s permission, I’d like to make a few dishes for dinner tonight. Is that all right?”

““““Yes, please!””””

It was the entire maid staff, not their boss, who responded in unison.

“I’ll go convince the head chef!”

“I’ll check our ingredients!”

“I’ll, umm, umm... I’ll go clean up our room.”

Before the head maid could bring her wrath down on them, the girls went flying from the room.

“Honestly, those girls...”

The head maid sighed, then showed us to our rooms, which were fairly large.

“If there are three of these big rooms, we probably didn’t need to kick those maids out of theirs.”

The rooms aside from mine all had four beds each, which was likely enough for everyone if we pushed the beds together.

It would be a bit tight, but considering all the small kids in my group, we could fit into one room and have Nana and her sisters stay in the other two.

“That’s true. I’ve already bought a mansion elsewhere in the royal capital, so we can go check it out tomorrow and move over there if it seems livable.”

The viceroy’s wife in Labyrinth City had helped me find a house in a scenic area near the border between the lower-and middle-class noble areas.

It was about three times larger than the baron’s mansion, with a salon for inviting over other nobles and a garden big enough to host a decent-sized party. If anything, it was probably intended for mid-level nobles with more social clout than a bottom-tier noble like me.

Maybe it’d be better if I switched mansions with Baron Muno.

“Whoa, all you can see out the window is this huge wall.”

“It’s the third castle wall from the outside.”

The royal capital was a city that had expanded outward from the castle walls several times in its history. Now, nearly seven hundred years after it was established, there were seven walls in concentric circles, with the royal castle at the center. Of course, that didn’t include the several castle walls within the royal area.

According to the wife of the viceroy of Labyrinth City Celivera, Marquis Ashinen’s wife, who was from the royal capital, most of the biggest noble mansions, like those belonging to feudal lords, viscounts, and higher, were all within the innermost wall that had originally been the walls of the city when it was first built.

So really, as a feudal lord with control of a City Core, Baron Muno should have sited his mansion in that area, too.

If it was a problem of money, I would have been happy to provide support, but it was probably more about power and influence. I decided to keep my nose out of it and let the shrewd Viscount Nina do her thing.



“Master, Nana’s underwear is too big, I report!”

A little while after we got settled in our rooms, I heard loud pattering footsteps in the hallway, and Number 8 came flying into the room.

She was practically naked from the waist up.

Though she was wearing one of Arisa's handmade brassieres, which apparently belonged to Nana, it wasn't even close to the right size, nor was it successfully hiding any of the parts it was supposed to.

"Geh!"

"Lewd!"

Arisa and Mia jumped up in alarm and immediately scrambled to cover the exposed chest of Number 8 with a towel.

"Master! We used to all be the same size as Nana, but now there is a large difference, I protest!"

"Master, it is unfair to enhance only Nana with new equipment, I report."

Number 6 and Number 5 came running in, too.

Both of them were also in brassieres that were a few cup sizes too big.

Given that they were under a year old, they had no sense of shame at all.

"Master, turn around."

"I already am."

My back was already turned when Arisa made her request. I waited for Nana's sisters to put on clothes.

"Master, I apologize that Number 8 and the others appear to have caused trouble for you."

Number 1 came in behind the younger homunculi to apologize on her sisters' behalves.

The others were behind her, bowing their heads as well. They had changed out of their traveling clothes into some casual clothes borrowed from Nana.

"I'll be sure to give them a thorough scolding..."

"Don't worry about it."

“Thank you for your generosity, master.”

The sisters bowed their heads again.

“Master, Number 1 and the others wanted to speak with you, I report.”

“““Nana!”””

Nana poked her head from behind her sisters, who whipped around and glared at her.

“We intended to wait for the appropriate time—”

“No, it’s fine. I can talk now.”

There was still time before I had to prepare dinner, so I figured I could build up some communication with Nana’s sisters and maybe hear about their adventures at the same time.

Since we wouldn’t all fit into any one of the rooms we’d been given, we borrowed the biggest room instead, the dining room.

“Thanks to your incredible compassion, master, we were able to bury our former master’s mementos at the site of his wife’s grave.”

Number 1 sat up straight and bowed her head stiffly, and the others followed suit.

I respectfully listened. They had already said this, but they may have wanted to repeat it formally.

“Please raise your heads. I’m glad you all made it back safely.”

“That, too, was thanks to the Magic Bags and other travel supplies you provided for us, master.”

The Magic Bag I gave the sisters was the same kind of magic tool as the Garage Bag I’d acquired back in the Valley of Dragons.

I figured I would hear about their journey, but for some reason, they were all sitting and looking at me silently.

“Is something wrong?” I prompted.

“Erm, well...”

Number 1 turned slightly pink as she hesitated.

What could this be about?

“Master, Number 1 and the others want you to give them names, too, but are afraid to ask, I report.”

““““Number 7!””””

“My name is Nana, I report.”

Nana corrected her sisters rather smugly as they shouted her old name at her indignantly.

She had a point, though: When we had last parted ways with the sisters, I do remember promising to give the rest of them names whenever we met again.

“Master, what is my name? I inquire.”

Number 8 brought her face close to mine.

She was so close that we were in danger of accidentally kissing.

“H-hey! You’re too close!”

“Mm, back off!”

The iron-wall pair of Arisa and Mia dragged Number 8 away from me.

“Number 8! We ought to proceed in order of seniority.”

“Number 1, that is an outdated practice, I protest.”

“Perhaps we should decide with rock-paper-scissors to make things fair, I propose.”

“As a sudden death match would take too long, Number 3 proposes a tournament format.”

The sisters argued among themselves about who should receive a name first.

They had surprisingly distinct personalities: Number 2 was watching her sisters in silence, while Number 5 seemed to be struggling to find the right time to join in, opening her mouth only to close it again and again.



“Master, do you have proper names in mind for them?” Arisa whispered.

“Of course—”

“You’re not going to give them super-simple names, like Ichiko or Ein for Number 1, are you?”

...How did she know?

“Ugh, I swear...” Arisa sighed. “Even if you base it on their numbers, at least pick something that will suit each of them.”

That’s why I was going to go with Ichiko for one, Futami for two, and so on...

I couldn’t really come up with any Shiga Kingdom–style names, so I decided to flip through my documents to look for the names of famous people, spellbook authors, and so on—but as I opened the folder, I found something more fitting.

Amid the Japanese memo pads I’d gotten at the dark auction in the old capital was a list of Japanese words and their equivalents in various foreign languages. It was a bit out of place compared to the rest of the notes, but I wasn’t going to complain, since it seemed like it would come in handy now.

I looked over the list of numbers, picking out words that wouldn’t seem too out of place as girls’ names.

“Sorry, but I’m going to go in numerical order.”

I stopped the sisters before they could begin their rock-paper-scissors tournament.

“Number 1...your name is Adin.”

At first, I was going to name her “Ann,” after the French word for “one,” but I had already given that name to one of the alchemist girls in the Echigoya Company; instead, I decided on the Russian word for “one.”

“Thank you very much, master! I, Adin, swear my undying fealty to you.”

The leader, who wore her hair in a braided bun, Number 1—now Adin—produced her shield and rapier from her Garage Bag and saluted me like a soldier, then bowed formally.

“Number 2...you’ll be Ithnani.”

“Thank you. I am Ithnani.”

Number 2—Ithnani—who wore her hair in a braided ponytail, repeated her name quietly but with pride. Following Adin’s example, she took out her war hammer and bowed.

Incidentally, her name came from “ithnan,” the Arabic word for “two.” I’d better take note of all this so I don’t forget.

“Number 3...Tria.”

“Yes, master. Number 3...I mean, Tria’s name is Tria.”

Number 3, who wore a loose side ponytail, referred to herself in the third person.

She produced her long-handled pike from her Garage Bag and accidentally stabbed it into the ceiling in the process, then ended up leaving a long gash on the ceiling in her hurry to pull it back out. Evidently she had a klutzy side.

Nana had told me that Number 3 enjoyed cooking; I fervently hoped that her klutziness didn’t come out in the kitchen.

I reassured the apologetic Tria, then moved on to the next girl’s name.

“Number 4...Vier.”

“Name accepted, master. I am Vier.”

Number 4—Vier—who wore her hair in a ponytail draped in front of her chest, placed her broadsword on the floor and bowed.

Like Number 2, she used few words. However, unlike the first three, there were few changes in her expression.

“Number 5...Fünf.”

“Thank you for the name, I declare. Fünf...Fünf...it is a good name, I boast.”

Number 5, now Fünf, who had disheveled shoulder-length hair, spoke in a similar way to Nana, with an equally blank expression.

Come to think of it, when we parted ways in the Cradle, Number 3 and Number 4 still spoke like Nana, too, and Number 1 through Number 3 didn’t really change their expressions that much.

They must have interacted with some very expressive people on their journey and learned along the way.

“Thank you, master, I declare.”

Having learned from the mistake of Number 3, Number 5 didn’t take her poleax out of her Garage Bag before she bowed.

“Number 6...Seis.”

“I am Seis. I pledge my gratitude and loyalty to master, I declare.”

Number 6—Seis—who had two side buns, made a dramatic gesture with the short spear she’d taken out of her Garage Bag before striking a pose.

Tria looked frustrated when she saw this, so she was probably trying to do the same kind of move. Maybe I could have them give a performance in a bigger space sometime?

“Master, I am next, I declare!”

Number 8 jumped up and down, her short pigtails bouncing.

Her face was about as blank as Nana’s, but she did express herself through gestures a lot. She was also the only one of the sisters who didn’t have a big bust.

“Number 8...you’ll be Huit.”

“Huit! My name is Huit, I declare! Adin, Ithnani, Tria, Vier, Fünf, Seis, Nana, Huit...” With her scimitar at her waist, Huit enthusiastically announced her name, then listed those of her sisters. “...Yes, Huit is definitely the cutest, I announce!”

“““That is incorrect, I protest,””” chorused several voices.

“Ithnani is the strongest.”

“Tria thinks Tria is the best, I insist.”

Huit’s declaration set off a heated argument among the sisters, who all insisted that their name was the best.

That was fine when it was just verbal, but once they started trying to grab one another’s hair, I stepped in and put a stop to it.

“All different. All nice.”

Mia’s words, reminiscent of a children’s poem, finally stopped the fighting.

“Would you mind telling me about your travels now?”

“Yes, please allow me.”

Adin began speaking for the group.

As the story went, after we parted ways with them near Seiryuu City, they headed west through Seiryuu County, taking a different route than we did: They crossed the mountains by way of the mining city and entered Kuhanou County, then got a bit lost before making their way toward the Fujisan Mountains.

They hadn’t run into any excessively strong monsters, but they still got into danger several times.

“We explored some old ruins, too, I declare.”

“With John, who we met in the harpy valley, I report.”

“Mito was in the ruins, I declare.”

The lower-number sisters spoke up one after another, though I wasn’t sure what they were talking about.

“John and Mito called me Hachiko, I inform.”

...Hachiko?

“Were these John and Mito people reincarnations? Transmigrations or transferences?” Arisa asked.

“I do not know,” Adin answered. “But Mito used powerful magic without a chant.”

That reminded me: Zena, the magic soldier from Seiryuu County, told me that she ran into Nana’s sisters on her journey, and she mentioned those two as well.

If I remembered right, Mito had defeated an intermediate demon on her own.

“Chantless... What color hair did they have?”

“John and Mito both have black hair.”

“Then they were summoned here, not reborn here? But they might just be wearing a wig like me... Master, you can’t get any information on Mito and John, can you?”

I searched the name “Mito” on my map, per Arisa’s request, but didn’t get any results. While there were a few hits for “John,” none of them had any unique skills, or else came up as “Skills Unknown.” I reported the results to Arisa.

“Aww, too bad... Well, they don’t seem to be bad people. I was just curious to meet them.”

“I’m sure we’ll run into them someday,” I reassured the disappointed Arisa, without any particular basis. Then I asked Adin to continue her tale.

“After we met up with Mito, we ran into an army fighting demons and monsters in a field and got involved to save a friend of John’s. Fortunately, we were able to accomplish our goals with the help of Mito’s support and attack magic. Then, in order to secure more funds for travel, we worked in a town called Fau in Zetts County—”

“We waited tables with Mito at a restaurant, I declare!” Huit excitedly interrupted Adin.

The other girls seemed eager for a turn, too: They told me about the town of Fau, a dragon encounter, and other stories.

“Mito broke her promise to guide us and disappeared, and John went after her, so we resumed our journey once we had saved up enough money for the road.”

In Kuhanou County, they got involved with refugees, attacked by bandits and deserters, and encountered other troubles, but none of them were serious threats, given how much the sisters had leveled up on their journey.

As always, they continued getting lost, but along the way...

“I saved Spiderson when he was injured, and he got attached to me, I report!”

This Spiderson must be the name of the long-legged spider crab she had tamed as a mount.

“Master, Number 8—that is, Huit—acquired the ‘Animal Training’ skill,” Vier, who had the “Analyze” skill, clarified blandly.

“Then once Huit made Spiderson her servant—”

“Spiderson is my friend, I correct.” Huit interrupted Adin again.

Adin dutifully corrected herself, then explained that once they started traveling on Spiderson’s back, they were able to cover more ground much more quickly.

“We got into a bit of a scrap when we entered the Village of Forest Giants, where the grave is located, but once the chief Mr. Lank noticed our resemblance to Nana, we were able to enter without a problem.”

Apparently Zen’s wife’s grave was in the Village of Forest Giants in Muno Barony.

Then we probably could’ve just traveled together, I realized—but there was no point saying that now, so I kept it to myself.

“Still, I’m surprised the Undead King was able to make his wife’s grave in the Village of Forest Giants,” Arisa remarked.

“Master had an Amulet of Humanity, I report,” Nana responded.

Giants aside, the fairies in the village were very sensitive to miasma. There must have been some other reason he was allowed to enter the village, I think.

“But why did he choose the Village of Forest Giants for the grave anyway?”

“Our former master said that it was the only place where it wouldn’t be in danger of being destroyed.”

Because Zen was an enemy of Marquis Muno, his wife’s grave might have been destroyed if it was near a human settlement. If it wasn’t, it might yet get dug up by monsters or animals, and if he left undead guards at the grave, his wife might become undead, too.

“Once we completed the burial, we rode Spiderson again and crossed the Fujisan Mountains, and we were reunited with you shortly thereafter, master.”

Adin smoothly left out the part where they startled a band of merchants and

caused a huge traffic jam, wrapping up the tale.

Well, there was no need to rehash that incident anyway.

“Mew?”

Tama, who’d been sleeping peacefully on my lap, suddenly looked up, her ears twitching.

Pochi woke up next to her, too, and rubbed her eyes sleepily.

Shortly after, there was a quiet knock, and one of the maids peered into the room.

“Sir Knight, I just came to let you know that the kitchen is ready.”

Adin had just finished her story anyway, and the maid looked very excited, so I brought Lulu and Tria, Nana’s sister who supposedly loved cooking, along with me to the kitchen.



“Sir Knight, Lord Baron and Lady Nina have returned.”

After a fun dinner, we were using the dining room to discuss our plans for the following days, when one of the maids came in to announce the arrival of the baron and company.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Your Excellency, Miss Nina.”

Baron Leon Muno and Viscount Nina Lottel entered, looking exhausted from their long journey.

Lady Karina and a few of the maids, including the head maid, were in the room, too.

“Hello again, Satou. It’s been a while. You’re looking well.”

“Yo, Satou. Your ridiculously impressive feats have been the talk of the town even in the royal capital.”

Baron Muno and Viscount Nina both greeted me in their usual manner.

“Mr. Baron...?”

“It’s Mr. Baron, sir!”

Tama and Pochi jumped out from behind me and rushed over to the baron, who had only just sat down on the sofa.

“Come here, dear Tama and Pochi.”

“Yaaay!”

“Sir!”

The pair seemed very attached to Baron Muno, probably because he’d spoiled them like they were his grandchildren.

“So you’re happier to see Tama and Pochi than your own daughter, Father?” Karina looked a little pouty.

“Of course not, Karina. Please, come over here, too.”

Used to her behavior, Baron Muno spread out his arms to give a fatherly hug to his daughter. It looked a little awkward, given Karina’s pubescent age.

“Welcome back, Karina. You didn’t get hurt or scared in Labyrinth City at all, did you?”

“Mr. Raka protected me, of course. I haven’t been hurt in the slightest.”

I think she did get scared on several occasions, but she didn’t touch on that subject at all.

Lady Karina wasn’t really capable of disguising her feelings, though, so I’m guessing she had already written over those bad memories with fun and happy ones.

“So then, Satou. You’ve been with our dear Miss Karina for about a trimoon, have you not? Have there been any developments yet?”

“Developments...?”

“Tch. I guess that wasn’t enough, then...,” Viscount Nina muttered to herself.

From the sound of things, maybe she was behind the incident before we left Labyrinth City, when Karina challenged me to a battle with marriage on the line.

“...Hmm?”

Nina looked over at the door, where Number 8—that is, Huit—was peering

into the room, with the other sisters behind her.

“I see you’ve acquired some new faces...or several more of the same one.”

“Yes, these are Nana’s sisters.”

At this, Nina nodded. “Ah, the ones who were off on their own?”

“Yes, we just met back up in the royal capital.”

“Glad to hear it. But, although I’m sure this isn’t news to you, there can’t be enough rooms for you here.”

“The maids were kind enough to lend us their room.”

“Ahh, those girls, eh? Still popular with the ladies, I see.”

“Not at all.”

They’re not after me, just my cooking.

“Of course you’re the only one who’s clueless about it. Will you introduce us to these girls, too?”

At Nina’s request, I had the homunculi sisters come in one at a time, and I introduced them to her and Baron Muno.

“We must apologize for intruding on your home so rudely,” said Number 1—Adin.

“You girls are with Satou, right? Then you’re as good as family to us, too. We don’t mind putting you up.”

Nina dismissed the apology magnanimously. She seemed more like the head of the house than Baron Muno, the actual owner.

“Sorry about the small space, though,” she added.

“It’s fine for us, but doesn’t a mansion this size hinder your social life with other nobles, Lord Baron?”

Arisa had a point. Noble society largely revolved around inviting other nobles over for banquets, chatting in a salon, having garden parties, and hosting similar events; not having the space for these could really be a problem.

“Mm. Our plan was to buy a mansion four times this size, but the bureaucrat

we sent ahead to take care of it turned out to be a bit of a pushover. We gave him a money order for the down payment, but he got talked into using it as payment in full for this place by some crafty real estate merchant.”

It was unlike Viscount Nina to complain like this. The stress of the journey must have been getting to her.

I reached into my sleeve to produce two nutritional supplement potions from Storage, and I handed them to Viscount Nina and Baron Muno.

“What is this?”

“It’s a nutritional supplement, since you seem tired.”

The baron moved to drink the potion immediately, but Viscount Nina silently stopped him and drank hers first, like a poison-taster.

“It’s sweet—but very impressive. I feel like I could work for two or three nights straight with all this energy. But there’s nothing dangerous producing this effect, is there?”

“Of course not.”

Once I confirmed this, Viscount Nina gestured to the baron that it was okay to drink.

“Oooh, this is amazing. Thank you, Satou.”

Baron Muno’s eyes blazed with delight.

As soon as their complexions started glowing, I turned back to the topic of the mansion.

“If you’d like, perhaps I could exchange the mansion I bought in the royal capital for yours?”

The one I purchased would still be a bit small for a baron, but it met all the minimum requirements for noble social events.

“No need to worry about us. I’ve already negotiated with His Excellency the prime minister to give us Marquis Muno’s mansion, which was seized by the kingdom through low-pressure loan repayment tactics.”

I should’ve known Viscount Nina would have it handled.

“Still, Ms. Nina, do you work this late every night?”

“Just about, yeah. I’ve got lots of information-gathering and foundation-laying to do with other lords and nobles before the kingdom meeting at the end of the year.”

I guess feudal lords are pretty busy.

“That sounds like hard work.”

“You make it sound like it’s got nothing to do with you. Right now, I’m working on your promotion.”

“Promotion?”

But I’m perfectly content as an honorary hereditary knight?

“Yes, I’d like to make you a permanent baronet, but the Vistall Duchy nobles and old-guard families lost their minds at the idea. ‘Trying to make a youngster who’s barely of age into part of the Shiga Kingdom’s esteemed permanent nobility is an insult to the ancestral king’s honor,’ or something like that.”

“I don’t really need a higher rank, but did all of the old-guard noble families object?”

“No, Marquis Ashinen’s faction and the family of Count Sobil were very cooperative. Count Litton’s and Marquis Kelten’s factions were neutral. The only side that really objected strongly was Viceroy Bonam; the rest were mostly half-hearted objections, and there might’ve even been some bribery involved.”

I recognized names like Marquis Ashinen, who was the viceroy of Labyrinth City Celivera, and his wife’s friend, Ema Litton, the wife of Count Litton, but Count Sobil didn’t sound familiar at all.

I searched my memo pad and discovered that they were the family of Bowman, the surname of the young noble boy who I rescued in the labyrinth. If I remembered right, he was the viceroy’s third son and Gerits’s rival.

Count Bonam was family to Sokell, who had been the acting viceroy in Labyrinth City. He had fallen from grace when his involvement with illicit production of demonic potions and corpse potions came to light; maybe he was blaming it on me instead.

“But that’ll be fine. If I make some concessions to the heads of their factions, it’ll be solved in a jiff. The problem is the folks from Ougoch Duchy—specifically, Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen.”

Hmm? The food-loving noble duo? What about them?

“They insist that baronet is too low of a rank for you. ‘He should be a baron at the least, or a viscount or a count.’ They’re trying to go over my head and make that happen, and it’s not easy to stop them...”

I could see that pair doing something like that.

“But a vassal of Baron Muno couldn’t be the same rank as him or even higher, right?”

There was the precedent of his counselor, Viscount Nina, being an honorary viscount, and as a feudal lord Baron Muno was treated more like a count himself, but it would still definitely be strange.

“Which is why they’re plotting to push through that by making you into a vassal of Duke Ougoch instead.” Nina sighed.

“Such troublemakers...”

The baron chimed in with a light tone as he played with Tama and Pochi nearby.

“Why do you sound so unconcerned? You okay with Satou being stolen by some other noble?”

“Of course not. That would be dreadful, but...given Satou’s quick rise to fame, I do wonder if that might be a better fit for him...”

As always, Baron Muno was a very considerate man.

Nina groaned. “Honestly, you’re such a pushover.”

“That’s one of His Excellency’s good points,” I replied reassuringly.

“Tch, I forgot there was another mild-mannered pushover here.”

Nina scowled, but something about her expression said she wasn’t as annoyed as she seemed.

“Oh, all right. Leave the dirty work to me. Sorry, Arisa, but would you mind

helping me with secretarial work while we're in the royal capital?"

"Of course! You're breaking your back for my dear master. I'd be happy to help you as much as you need. That's okay, right?"

She looked to me for permission, and I nodded.

"Thanks a ton. There's not as much work to do as we had back at home, so just once every couple days is fine."

"Okey-dokey, you got it!" Arisa saluted Nina lightly.

"How is the recovery of the barony going?"

"Three times faster than we expected, I'd say. The redevelopment of Muno City is coming along smoothly, and thanks to your work on the old capital and the dwarf dominion, we've solved our food shortage and brought in plenty of workers and artisans. And you did some socializing on our behalf, too, didn't you? Our bad reputation as a 'cursed territory' has all but fallen by the wayside now. So now we've got the third or fourth sons of some broke noble families in Ougoch Duchy applying to be officers and government officials for us."

At least they had finally made it out of the staffing shortage they were in back when Arisa and I were helping out.

The *sasa kamaboko*-like dish that I created in Muno City was also now being exported to nearby territories as a Muno City specialty.

"That lulu fruit orchard that you talked Viscount Emerin into is going great, too. It'll probably still be another two or three years before the trees bear fruit, but the engineer who's in charge of the farm's construction says that the soil is a perfect match. We've got high hopes for future harvests."

That was good to hear.

The lulu fruit was a great ingredient for making cakes and other baked goods.

"And then, last month? Viscount Emerin himself came to see the orchard, too. And he brought his youngest daughter, little Miss Rina, to study manners as an apprentice lady-in-waiting to Soluna."

Viscount Nina happily reported that the rumors about the territory being cursed would soon be completely dispelled.

I guess having an upper noble's daughter visit as an apprentice was a bigger deal than I realized.

"Once our funds are a bit more plentiful, that'll open up our options even more. But I guess we can trick some royal capital merchants into coughing up some cash."

Miss Nina made a face.

"In that case, I can invest some funds."

"That's nice of you, but the funding we need isn't an amount one individual can put a dent in."

"Don't worry. I earned quite a bit through my trading on the sugar route."

I whispered the amount of money I had earned from Dragonpen Trading Company dividends and pirate-busting.

"...Oh-ho. Yes, that is impressive. So how much of that would you be willing to invest?"

"All of it is fine with me. I have no other use for it."

"Don't explorers need a lot of expensive equipment?"

"I have other funds secured for that."

In fact, I'd earned ten times that amount of money from salvaging on the sugar route. Considering my total assets, this was probably less than 1 percent of my wealth.

If I didn't use it like this once in a while, it'd just keep piling up in my Storage.

"Then we'll gratefully accept your investment. Right, Baron?"

The baron nodded.

"Now we can begin preparations to take back our territories from monsters and villains."

"Really?" Arisa tilted her head.

"Yes, we've managed to recover two towns along the main road, but the other cities and towns are still beyond our reach so far."

Nina nodded bitterly.

“Pochi’s great at getting rid of monsters!”

“Tama tooo...?”

Pochi and Tama volunteered eagerly.

The abandoned mine city that had been taken over by kobolds and other fairy races was a separate matter, but we could probably take back the towns that had simply been infested by monsters in a matter of days. After all, I had helped the kobolds find a new vein where they could mine the blue crystals they needed for reproduction a while back, so they would probably be willing to relocate if I made a separate safe area for them.

“You mustn’t interrupt adults’ conversations, you two.”

“Aye-aye.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Liza gave them an uncharacteristically quiet yet intense scolding, Tama and Pochi shrank back meekly, their fur standing on end.

“It is true, though. We’d be happy to help you take back the cities anytime.”

“You make it sound so easy. But when the royal capital investigated the territory before Baron Muno took over, they found some beastly naga and five-headed hydras. Even the Shiga Eight Swordsmen of the time were reluctant to face such foes.”

“Those sound like worthy opponents.”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up a quiet murmur from Liza.

At a glance, Nana and the other kids looked ready for a fight, too.

“I know you all have beaten a floormaster, but I imagine that’d still be tough even for you. More importantly, we need to have strong enough forces to keep those areas secure once we’ve taken them back, or there’s no point. No matter how fast we move, we’ll need to gather some knights and soldiers before we ask for your help—I’d say it’ll be another six months at least.”

“Understood. Please let us know if you need help investigating beforehand,

though.”

“Sure. Will do. Besides, we’ve also got to solve the fact that we don’t have any nobles except me who we can be appointed as viceroys or governors in Muno Barony.”

Technically, my group could receive honorary knight titles, since they had defeated a floormaster, but evidently that wasn’t enough to be appointed governor. One would probably have to be at least a baronet for that.

Maybe that was part of why they wanted to promote me.

Hmm?

Thinking about it further, I realized that I was able to take control of several City Cores beneath the desert as just a hereditary knight, and I was offered the option of controlling the City Core in Muno Castle’s basement even before I had that honorary title.

I was a little curious about whether I was an exception, or if it was just a formality of Shiga Kingdom law.

“...Orion is coming to the royal capital, too?!”

Lady Karina, who was in conversation with her father, suddenly bellowed.

Orion was Baron Muno’s eldest son and Karina’s younger brother.

“That’s right. The eldest son of a feudal lord can have his coming-of-age ceremony performed by His Majesty. It’s quite an honor,” Baron Muno said proudly.

He went on to add that Orion would get here right at the end of the year.

“Excuse me, master. You have a guest...”

The head maid came hurrying into the room to address Baron Muno.

““Sir Satou!””

The maid was interrupted by two excited voices yelling my name.

They were none other than the pair of Ougoch Duchy big shots we’d been talking about not long ago: Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen.

For some reason, they were each holding a bottle of sake.

“We heard that you were in town and could not wait another second to come see you.”

“We’ve heard a lot about your exploits from Baron Jeetbert and rumors on the grapevine!”

“Indeed, we are quite proud to call you a friend.”

Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen seemed elated on my behalf.

The person Count Hohen mentioned, Baron Jeetbert, was a noble from Ougoch Duchy and captain of a trade fleet, who I’d happened upon and rescued when he was stranded in the Seadragon Islands.

“Sorry, Sir Pendragon. I couldn’t stop these two from running wild. Baron Munō, Viscount Lottel, allow me to apologize on their behalf for the sudden intrusion.”

This came from Viscount Siemmen, a man who always looked like a stern teacher.

He was a noble of Ougoch Duchy who ran a scroll workshop, as well as the older brother of my friend Tolma, and he frequently helped me with making and ordering original magic scrolls.

Upon hearing his sensible comment, Count Hohen and Marquis Lloyd awkwardly exchanged glances, then cleared their throats deliberately and stood up straight.

“Baron Munō, our apologies for visiting at night without warning.”

“We were too eager to be reunited with our friend and came without thinking. Forgive us.”

They both lowered their heads to Baron Munō.

I didn’t think they looked particularly sorry, but fortunately Baron Munō seemed much more grateful for the visit than annoyed.

“So, are those bottles a gift?” Miss Nina inquired.

“Indeed. We found some sake that goes well with tempura—erm, I mean,

goes down the throat very nicely. So we brought it along in hopes that Sir Satou and company might enjoy it with us.”

Marquis Lloyd couldn’t keep his real intentions from slipping out before he loudly cleared his throat again and corrected himself.

In other words, they came because they wanted some freshly fried tempura.

“High-quality sake and fresh tempura—the baron and I are invited, too, of course, I presume?”

“Yes, of course.”

“All right, then we’ll go fry some up.”

I headed to the kitchen with Lulu, put a pot with preheated oil over the fire, and started frying some prepared ingredients.

The reason I conveniently had all this prepared was because of all the drinking parties we had in Labyrinth City.

Fried foods like tempura are popular just about anywhere.

“Aah, now this is the life! I’ve been dreaming of this red pickled-ginger tempura!”

“Preposterous! Shrimp tempura reigns supreme! And it goes so well with the mild White Mountain sake.”

“Red pickled-ginger tempura goes best with Royal Sakura!”

Count Hohen and Marquis Lloyd began boasting about their favorite kinds of tempura and sake.

The two sake bottles they brought as gifts, White Mountain and Royal Sakura, were famed as the top two best Shigan liquors.

Aside from the shrimp and red pickled ginger, I also made the shiitake mushrooms, pumpkin, carrot, green bean, perilla, and lotus root tempura that I’d gotten in the old capital, as well as the tara sprout, green bamboo, mioga ginger, and river cod that I’d acquired in Bolenan Forest, plus some octopus and squid from the sugar route, and even quail eggs, cheese, and sausages from Labyrinth City.

“Oooh, this is so piping hot and delicious.”

“Deliciosooo...?”

“Pochi thinks Mr. Hamburg tempura would be yummy, too, sir.”

Tama and Pochi popped up on the other side of Baron Muno, sneakily joining in on the feast.

But of course they were quickly caught by Liza and carried out in limp corpse-like poses.

Some of the other kids and maid staff were peeking in through the door, practically drooling. My kids and the maids had all eaten a full dinner not long ago, but seeing all this tempura must have made them want some, too.

“Lulu, if you don’t mind...”

I whispered to Lulu, requesting that she fry up some tempura for the other kids and maids in the kitchen.

“It’s different from deep-fried food. I like the light texture.”

“They’re all delicious, but this fish tempura is especially exquisite.”

“Yes, it really makes the sake go down quicker.”

Miss Nina and Viscount Siemmen seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the tempura and sake, too.

I joined in a bit myself; the Shiga sake that the gourmet-loving noble pair had brought was from particularly good years of both White Mountain and Royal Sakura, and it was truly delicious. No wonder these brands were so prized by upper-class nobles.

“Satou, isn’t there any sakura salmon tempura?” Miss Nina asked me after ordering some ale from a maid.

“Sakura salmon?”

Come to think of it, the progenitor vampire Ban, who lived in the Lower Stratum of the Labyrinth, might have mentioned something like that as a possible sushi ingredient.

It must be some kind of fish from this world.

“Sure. It’s the most popular fish for cooking in the royal capital in this season.”

“Sakura salmon fishing will be banned for the rest of the year soon,” Viscount Nina and Viscount Siemmen explained.

“I see. I was planning to do some sightseeing in the royal capital tomorrow, so I’ll see if it’s for sale in the marketplace somewhere.”

“Wait, Sir Satou!”

“Yes! You must wait!”

Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen, who were both a bit red in the face, stood up to loom over me.

“Sakura salmon tastes far different depending on the skill of the fisherman and its transportation to the market!”

“Indeed! It is so difficult to discern the best specimens that there are some in the royal capital who make that their entire occupation!”

Evidently, they had strong opinions on sakura salmon as well.

I decided to ask their recommendations for the best fishermen and fish markets, and they even wrote some letters of recommendation to their favorite restaurants and the markets with the best ingredients and spices.

Given their love of fine cuisine, I had no doubt that all the options would be delicious.



Midnight Machinations

“Satou here. I think conspiracies tend to take place at night. If it’s dark enough that neither party can see the others’ faces, the mood is even better.”

“Good evening, Your Majesty.”

After the impromptu tempura party with the gourmet nobles, I checked my map and found that the king and prime minister were still working, even after the second cycle of night. I decided to visit with a little report and an apology.

“It’s the great ancestral k—I mean, Nanashi the Hero!”

As always, the king seemed to think that I, or at least Nanashi the Hero, was really the ancestral king Yamato.

“Sir Nanashi? Ooh, Ancest—erm, Sir Nanashi!”

Also in the room, the prime minister and a member of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, Sir Juleburg, bowed to me along with the king. Judging by the papers on the desk, they appeared to be discussing candidates for the Shiga Eight Swordsmen.

“Please, raise your heads.”

At that, the king and prime minister looked up and invited me to take a seat on the office sofa.

“Sorry to interrupt while you’re working.”

“Why, you are always more than welcome!” the king responded eagerly.

“What were you doing?” I asked.

“Looking over the paperwork for prospective members of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen.”

The king showed me the aforementioned documents.

I noticed my name written on one of the fifteen or so sheets of paper. The recommender column started with the names of Lady Helmina, the gun user of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, as well as Duke Ougoch and some other nobles from the old capital, the viceroy of Labyrinth City Celivera, General Erthal of the labyrinth army, and quite a few others.

“This candidate has only recently come of age, but he appears to have considerable skill and courage. According to Lady Helmina, the one who recommended him, he trained hard in the labyrinth and raised his level a great deal in a very short time.”

Since I had changed my public level in the social networking column in between my first and most recent meetings with Lady Helmina, she seemed to have gotten the wrong idea.

“Huh, is that right?”

I gave an indifferent grunt to Sir Juleburg’s explanation and flipped through the rest of the papers.

Most of them were level 45 or above. The majority were Holy Knights, though there were a lot of royal knights and knights from other territories as well. I even saw some vagrant knights and knights from other kingdoms.

The only labyrinth explorers appeared to be me and the Scarlet Nobleman, Baronet Jelil.

“Don’t you think these guys would be a better fit for the Shiga Eight Swordsmen than some kid with barely any experience?”

I tried to push for Baronet Jelil and a level-50 katana user with the nickname “Windblade.”

They were both Shiga Kingdom nobles with respectable histories.

“If that is how you feel, Sir Nanashi...”

“Yes, experience is important.”

The king and prime minister agreed with me, but Sir Juleburg quickly objected.

“Wait a minute. The most important trait in the Shiga Eight Swordsmen is

strength. Sir Pendragon may be lacking experience, but he has potential to grow even stronger with training. I believe he will be an important swordsman to the Shiga Kingdom sooner or—”

“You’re pushing Pen-Pen pretty hard, huh?” I interrupted jokingly. All that praise was making me feel itchy.

“Sir Juleburg, is it your wish to make Sir Pendragon a member of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen?” asked the prime minister.

“I would not go that far just yet.” Sir Juleburg shook his head. “However, he is one of a select few who I would like to spar with in order to ascertain his skill.”

Phew, so he wasn’t going to insist that I join.

If I get stuck sparring with him, I’ll make sure I lose spectacularly.

“Oh yeah? Good luck with that.”

I tried to feign disinterest, attempting to shift the subject to the reason I’d come.

While Sir Juleburg didn’t seem to notice, the king and prime minister picked up on my hint and brought the topic of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen to a close.

“So I heard that airship I gave you made an emergency landing...”

“I am terribly sorry, Sir Nanashi.”

“We lost the airship so soon after you gifted it to us...”

Before I could apologize for the airship incident, the king and prime minister apologized to me instead.

“Don’t worry about it. I came to apologize about it myself.”

I tried to stop them from slamming their heads into the desk in apology and explained why I’d come.

“...Apologize, Sir Nanashi? But why?”

“Yeah, I came to take a look when I heard about the airship crashing. Looks like I was so worried about efficiency that I didn’t take enough safety precautions in case of problems.”

Adding any more Magic Furnaces would have been impossible without affecting the loading capacity, but I should have at least added a few small skypower engines with a battery-like magic storage system in case of an emergency.

“No, it is not your fault, Sir Nanashi! The airship captain said so, too. The airship was attacked by countless flying monsters, and other monsters even caused destruction in the engine room, yet the airship didn’t fall apart in midair, the Magic Furnaces didn’t explode, and the skypower engines didn’t stop running until right before the emergency landing.”

“Sir Nanashi, it is as the prime minister says. It would be absurd to ask anything more.”

“Really?”

“Most certainly!”

I supposed they might be right, since it wasn’t a military airship, but I still wanted to add a bit more safety features, if possible.

“So you don’t need this, then?”

I held up the new airship blueprints I’d drawn in light of recent events.

“Blueprints?”

“Yeah, I added six smaller skypower engines so that it can land safely even if the main engines all fail.”

I’d made these smaller engines with the specific goal of creating more buoyancy than usual in a short period of time, rather than a steady but smaller amount over a long period of time.

The airship would carry about 20 percent fewer passengers than the previous model, but it still had a bigger loading capacity than the airships that were already in use in the Shiga Kingdom.

“Don’t worry, I’ll give you the extra parts to go along with the large skypower engines for free.”

The leaders insisted that they would pay, but I refused to accept, thinking of the airship revamp like a recall or maintenance. Besides, I’d just whipped them

up with some spare parts I had lying around.

“By the way, why did the airship go down in the first place?”

It seemed like some kind of infighting within Duke Vistall’s family, but I didn’t know all the details, so I figured I would ask.

“I am ashamed of how it reflects on me as a king, but...”

With that apologetic preface, the king and prime minister gave me what information they had.

Evidently, it was Duke Vistall’s disowned son who had tried to have him assassinated on the airship. The official reason given for the disownment was that he was “unfit to be a duke,” though even the king didn’t know the real details.

“Huh, so it was a Vistall family matter...”

Since the airship had been lost because of a family fight about inheritance, Duke Vistall was to pay a fine that included the cost of rebuilding the airship. That seemed reasonable enough to me.

“Do you know why they attacked the airship?”

I was curious why they chose to make their move in the king’s territory instead of on their home turf. If assassination was their goal, wouldn’t it have been more efficient to use standard methods, like killing him in his sleep or poisoning his food?

“They say that killing a lord in his own territory is as difficult as hunting a dragon.”

Ah, that makes sense.

The prime minister’s words reminded me that it would be hard to kill a lord at home when he could use the powerful might of the City Core.

“Prime Minister, surely Sir Nanashi knew that,” the king chided.

“Right, of course. Please take a look at this, Sir Nanashi.”

The prime minister produced two objects wrapped in a blue cloth: a broken apparatus of some kind and a large screwlike object.

“These were found implanted in the miscreants and monsters who attacked the airship.”

The former looked familiar. It was a Demonic Heart, the nasty magic tool that was embedded in the terrorists working inside the airship.

“What’s this?” I pointed at the Demonic Heart on the table. “Do you know what it does?”

“I am sure you know this, Ancestr—er, Sir Nanashi—but it is an item called a Demonic Heart that was made in the ancient Flue Empire during the final stages of their war with the Orc Empire. It is a foul, cursed tool that contains the crystalized heart of a demon.”

There are plenty of instances of nations losing their sense of ethics in war, but this seemed especially evil.

“Once it has been equipped, it continuously provides the user with an effect similar to demonic potions, and it cannot be removed until the user dies. Like a demonic potion, it gradually causes the user to lose their humanity; the only possible end is for the user to be transfigured beyond recovery or turn into a monster, or so they say.”

Either way, there were no examples of anyone surviving more than half a month after being equipped with one.

Additionally, I learned that the tentacles weren’t a normal function of the Demonic Heart, but rather an irregularity caused by the device going into overdrive.

The king and prime minister were currently investigating how the terrorists had acquired them.

“And this?”

After requesting the prime minister’s permission, I picked up the screw and looked at it in detail.

It was a crushed screw around the size of a two-liter plastic bottle, with unfamiliar magic circuit-like patterns engraved into the grooves.

“What a strange pattern. I’m guessing it’s a magic tool, but I’ve never seen

one like it before.”

“According to the royal research laboratory, it’s a kind of enslavement collar, which is used to forcibly take control of savage monsters that normally cannot be tamed.”

“Oh, wow.”

So that was how they got strong monsters like the many-winged centipede under their control.

I couldn’t tell from the information in the AR or from my “Analyze” skill results where the item had been made.

“Is it a military weapon?”

“Yes, there are rumors that the monster tamers of the Weaselman Empire in the eastern part of the continent use them.”

The prime minister added that the weasemen used these screws and special one-rider golems to attack and devastate surrounding countries, which subsequently grew from small domains into dominating empires.

“So does that mean the Weaselman Empire was behind this rebellion thing?”

“Yes. We believe they were trying to cause chaos from behind the scenes.”

The prime minister added that the Weaselman Empire was probably trying to hinder the Shiga Kingdom’s ability to interfere before they attacked the smaller countries in the east.

“A war, huh...?”

I guess they have war even in a fantasy world.

They didn’t seem to be as utterly focused on wars between nations as Earth was, since this world had the threat of monsters and the help of monster-infested buffer zones, but evidently they still had military conflicts.

“As a king, I am ashamed that I have yet to achieve the eternal peace that the ancestral king sought to create.”

Wow, I didn’t know your goals were so crazy high...

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of, Your Majesty. You just have to do the best

that you can.”

I would rather not have wars, either, but it wouldn't be any good if the king was so preoccupied with such ideals that he got distracted.

“I shall carve your directive into my heart and work myself to the bone, O Ancestral King.”

“No need to go that far. Also, I'm not the ancestral king.”

“Yes, of course, I know.”

I can tell from your face that you don't.

“Will you be sending punitive forces to Vistall Duchy?”

Since all the feudal lords were gathered in the royal capital right now, I didn't want to get summoned to do something like that, hence the question.

“...Yes, we plan to send the Third or Fifth Regiment of Knights, since they can be dispatched at once.”

“I know it goes against your preferences, Sir Nanashi, but since Duke Vistall himself requested it, I'm afraid I cannot refuse...”

Having caught on that I didn't like war, the prime minister and king responded reluctantly.

For now, I was just relieved that I wouldn't have to do anything as a vassal of Baron Muno.

“Nah, I get it. Will the Shiga Eight be going, too?”

“We have no plans to do so,” Sir Juleburg said bluntly. “We exist as the swords of the Shiga Kingdom to protect the land from only the greatest of threats.”

Phew. At least the Shiga Eight Swordsmen candidates probably won't get enlisted, then.

“Duke Vistall has requested that Sir Gouen be sent along, too.”

“Ah, right. Gouen's family are vassals to the duke...”

Sir Juleburg grimaced at the prime minister's words.

Judging by the context, Sir Gouen must be one of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen.

“It goes against the ideals of the Shiga Eight, but if Sir Gouen himself wishes to participate out of his strong loyalty to Duke Vistall, it would not be right to stop him,” the prime minister pointed out.

I guess there was no rule stating that they couldn’t participate in a civil war.

Now that the conversation had turned to private matters, I decided to get out of the way of the king and company. I had already stayed longer than I planned.

“I’d better head out, Your Majesty.” I stood up from the sofa. “See you later.”

With a casual wave, I jumped out the window, then used Return in midair to teleport back to the mansion of Baron Muno.



“Welcome back, master.”

Arisa sat up in bed and greeted me in a low voice.

Tama’s ears twitched, but instead of waking up she just buried her face in Pochi.

“Remove Field Sensor.”

After quietly using a spell, Arisa gave me a mug from her Item Box.

“It seems like you had a long day. Why don’t you stop being such a workaholic and take a drink of this and sleep?”

I accepted the mug, which smelled warm and sweet. It seemed to be sweetened milk.

“Now, fall asleep in the arms of Holy Mother Arisa—”

Partway through her sentence, Nana returned from the bathroom, captured Arisa, and dragged her into the bed.

Nana was supposed to be sleeping along with her sisters, but she must have come here instead while she was half-asleep. She usually used Mia as a hug pillow; maybe she’d mistaken Arisa for Mia.

Once I drank the contents of the mug and put it in Storage, I slipped onto the

edge of the bed, too.

“Good night, Arisa.”

As Arisa struggled not to suffocate from Nana’s chest pressing against her, I fell asleep the moment I closed my eyes.

I guess I was more tired than I thought.

Sightseeing in the Royal Capital

“Satou here. Touring scenic locations and famous places is one of the joys of travel, but I think trying the local cuisine made with locally sourced ingredients is just as fun. And picking out souvenirs, of course.”

“Ooh, so this is our new house?”

Arisa jumped for joy as she looked up at the stylish mansion.

It was in a picturesque area near the border between the lower-and middle-class noble areas.

I had visited a few times as Akindoh, the fictional purveyor to the Pendragon family, but this was my first time coming here as Satou.

“Our home in Labyrinth City is wonderful, too, but this one really feels like a fancy noble’s mansion.”

Lulu’s timid, roundabout compliment was adorable.

“Yeah, it’s way nicer than the castle and villa from our old homeland.”

Arisa seemed to like it, too.

“Big yard.”

“There’s even a garden and a flower arch.”

A rainbow of flowers was blooming in the garden of the mansion, beautifully maintained by the gardener sent by the real estate agent. We probably would have to hire a full-time gardener to keep it up in the future.

“Mew...”

“We don’t get to help, sir.”

Pochi and Tama, who were excitedly holding their weeding tools, slumped in disappointment at the well-maintained gardens.

“Master, I wish to see the inside of the mansion, I declare.”

“Good idea. Let’s check out all the furnishings first.”

We proceeded past the circular driveway with space for carriages and went into the entrance hall.

“Whoever decked this place out has good taste.” Arisa seemed satisfied. “Everything’s so nice.”

The basic furniture was all chosen by the real estate agents, who had done a great job, since they were used to working for upper-class nobles. I had been a little worried whether the amount of money I had given them as a furniture budget would be enough.

“Let’s get a feel for the layout.”

The inside of the mansion was just as impeccably maintained as the outside, without a speck of dust to be found in any of the rooms.

“This seems like the room that gets the most sunlight on the second floor. Let’s make this our bedroom.”

“Mm. Agreed.”

The others all nodded, too; I took out the giant bed I had in Storage.

There were plenty of smaller bedrooms, enough that everyone could easily have their own room, but then they’d still wind up all sneaking into my bed one after another, so I decided not to bother pointing it out.

“A bed appeared, I report!” exclaimed Number 8—Huit.

“It’s the power of a wonderful ancient artifact,” I explained vaguely.

“That’s a pretty lame excuse.”

“You think so?”

Arisa looked exasperated, but Huit...

“Master is amazing, I praise.”

...seemed perfectly convinced.

“Wow, that actually worked...”

I pushed the reluctant Arisa out of the room and started putting furniture in everyone else's rooms: clothing cases, mirrors, and other large objects. The girls had smaller things like accessory cases in their own Fairy Packs.

"Treasure chest...?"

"Pochi likes the yellow one, sir."

Tama and Pochi took out the treasure chests they used to hold their accessories in the corners of their room. Tama's box was pink with cat ears on the lid, while Pochi's was yellow with a cartoon meat-shaped mark on it.

The two chests were packed with a mix of things like acorns, pretty rocks, toy rings, and some weird things like unidentifiable string and dried-up dead things, as well as some money, jewels, and even Magic Items.

They'd originally kept these objects directly in their Fairy Packs, but after an incident when Pochi had scattered all her pebbles in a panic during battle, I gave them the treasure boxes for holding small items within their Fairy Packs.

Unlike with the "Item Box" skill or Storage, you couldn't pick things out of a list of contents from the Fairy Pack.

"Master, thank you for giving us our own rooms as well."

The eldest sister Adin thanked me earnestly.

"Of course. Do you have enough furniture?"

"Yes, sir! The other sisters are currently bringing all of it in from the warehouse and attic."

"If it doesn't turn out to be enough, you can grab things from the guest rooms in the separate building. And if you need help carrying things, don't be afraid to ask me."

"It's all r—"

"Master, we are all right because we have 'Body Strengthening,' I declare."

Huit interrupted Adin.

"Ah, there you are. Let's go, Huit."

Adin grabbed Huit by the scruff of the neck like a cat and dragged her away.

Since Nana and the beastfolk girls had finished setting up their rooms already, they went to help the sisters carry in furniture as well.

“Speaking of which, where’s Lulu?”

“Kitchen.”

Typical Lulu.

I went to the kitchen with Arisa and Mia in tow.

“Ah, there she is!” Arisa pointed at Lulu gleefully.

“Master!”

“Sir!”

Lulu and Tria, the homunculi sister who liked cooking, were in the kitchen.

“Do you like it?”

“Yes, it’s even easier to use than the one in Labyrinth City.”

“Tria too! Tria likes it very much! Tria has never seen a more wonderful kitchen, Tria announces!”

Tria looked excited.

Her expression didn’t change much, but she still adorably expressed her happiness by raising her hands and jumping up and down. It was innocently cute in a different way from Huit’s pesky cuteness.

“Is it really that different? It looks about the same to me, except maybe the size.”

“It’s completely different! Everything is so much more convenient!”

Arisa didn’t look too interested, but Lulu pressed the subject insistently. This side of Lulu was adorable, too.

I had taken out most of the cookware that came with the kitchen and replaced it with my own handmade cooking magic tools. This kitchen was bigger than the one in Labyrinth City, meaning it wound up with more sophisticated equipment.

On top of that, I had used an improvement from the Labyrinth City kitchen.

“The bath’s on the small side.”

“Master, I can’t find the device to charge the water supply tool with magic—”

“It’s this here.”

I turned the handle on the faucet, producing water.

“There’s a water supply?”

“Yes, the nobles’ quarters in the royal capital have running water.”

There were aqueducts when we stayed in Baron Muno’s mansion, but we’d been so busy the day before that I’d forgotten to explain it to everyone.

I would have to guide them through it while we explored the city later.



“Wow, there’s a lot of people.”

Once we finished checking out the mansion and setting up our furniture, we went out into the city to buy some necessities for Nana’s sisters, as well as to sightsee. The area nearest to our new home had a lot of wealthy people’s homes and shops.

Pochi and Tama wanted to invite Lady Karina, too, but she was busy getting reeducated in social behavior.

“There are so many ingredients!”

“Lulu, Tria is interested in these!”

The cooking duo seemed pleased.

At our first stop, we bought sakura salmon at a store that the gourmet-loving Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen had recommended to us.

“Wow, they really are pink.”

“So byooti-ful...”

Tama, who loved pink, twirled around delightedly as she praised the sakura salmon.

Their eggs were the same color as the salmon roe I was familiar with.

“This roe came from fish that were caught just this morning. We have some in the back that have been aged or pickled, if you prefer.”

Perhaps because of the people who referred us here, a pretty lady who was the vice president of the store was guiding us around.

I decided to buy a large amount of the newly caught salmon sakura and fresh salmon roe, as well as a few kinds of the aged and pickled roe that the woman recommended. The store carried a small amount of trout, too, which I purchased as well.

Next, we stopped at a specialty shop the gourmet noble duo recommended and stocked up on some seasonings and spices. I was able to get cinnamon and several kinds of herbs, as well as replenish my dwindling supply of sake at a wholesale liquor store operated by the same company.

It was a bit too much to carry in our Magic Bags, so I had everything that didn't need to be kept fresh delivered to the mansion instead.

“Let's stock up on some vegetables and grains, too, shall we?”

Once we left that store, we turned our attention to the many outdoor stalls.

“Yes, sir! There are so many options, I don't know where to begin.”

“Tria wants to see fruits.”

Lulu and Tria headed over to the fruit stalls.

There was an abundance of fruits and vegetables lined up in the stalls, like something out of a Southeast Asian market.

“Mushrooms.”

Mia tugged on my sleeve and pointed excitedly at a kiosk selling all kinds of mushrooms.

“Yeah, let's buy a lot of them.”

“Mm.” Mia nodded happily.



Of course, the other girls were all peering at other stalls with great interest, too.

“There are so many kinds of pumpkins, I observe.”

“They have fresh wasabi and ginger, too. I would love to share some grilled meat topped with wasabi and fried food dipped in ginger and soy sauce with Nana’s sisters.”

“Meeew...meeeeat...?”

“Pochi will be a good girl and stick to fruits for now, sir.”

As always, the beastfolk girls were most interested in meat.

“I guess the capital of a major kingdom gets all kinds of goods and...”

Arisa trailed off as she browsed a stall selling root vegetables.

“Turnips,” said Mia.

“Those are sweet snow turnips!”

“Wow, you know a lot for such a little lady.” The shopkeeper seemed impressed by Arisa’s knowledge, then shifted into a sales pitch. “If you buy some, I’ll give you a good deal.”

“How many should we buy?”

“I don’t really want any.” Arisa shook her head. “They’re not particularly tasty—in fact, they’re weirdly bitter and astringent.”

“Wow, you really do know your stuff.” The shopkeeper looked at Arisa, fascinated. “These vegetables are only really grown in the plateau of the Chuushin Mountains around these parts. Is that where you’re from, missy?”

“Nope. I’m from a small nation near the center of the continent.”

With that, Arisa resumed walking.

“A long time ago, when I was trying to start reforming the land, the first vegetables my best subordinate gave me were regular snow turnips and those sweet snow turnips.”

She looked a little distant, but before I could comfort her...

“But being a downer doesn’t suit the adorable Arisa! Let’s go buy some necessities!”

Arisa smacked her own cheeks, raised her fist, and charged forward.

“Wooo...”

“Hip-hip-hooray, sir!”

As Arisa deliberately put on a cheerful face, Tama and Pochi immediately joined in, and the three of them ran through the crowd toward the part of the market where everyday necessities were sold.

“Master! Hurry, hurry...”

I waved back in response and followed behind her with the rest of the group.

“Master, they sell stationery and art supplies in this area, I report.”

Nana called out from a little ways away, and Tama and Pochi zipped over to her immediately.

Tama inspected the art supplies with a serious expression, and Pochi picked out a quill and writing paper from the large variety.

“Are you writing a letter to Yuni?” I asked her.

“No, sir. Well, I am, but that’s not what it’s for, sir. Pochi’s going to write a novel, sir!”

“Tama’s going to illustrate it...?”

“Music.”

“And I’m in charge of supervision, editing, and proofreading.”

I understood how Tama and Arisa were helping, but Mia’s input was a bit of a mystery. Was she playing music while Pochi worked, to help her write or something?

“I’d like you to read it when it’s finished, sir.”

“Of course. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

“Aye-aye!”

“Leave it to me! I’ll teach Pochi the essence of Japanese entertainment and

make this a real masterpiece!”

“Just don’t overdo it,” I warned the enthusiastic Arisa.

I had a feeling that she would end up wanting to make Pochi’s novel into an anime or something. Maybe I should make some magic tools for recording and lightboards and such.

“GWAAAAAH!”

I heard a male voice howling, and I turned to see Lulu pinning a man on the ground.

“This man is a pickpocket.”

It had certainly been a while since I’d last seen one: They were incredibly rare in Labyrinth City.

From the corner of my eye, I saw another sketchy-looking man creeping toward Nana’s sisters.

His hand was reaching toward the eldest sister Adin’s bottom.

I don’t think so.

I used “Warp” to teleport to Adin’s side, and I grabbed the man’s arm right before his hand touched anything.

“GAAAAAH!”

The lecherous man wailed as I twisted his arm.

“Groping is a crime!”

“Mm, death penalty.”

Arisa and Mia must have seen it, too.

“Pickpockeeet...?”

“He was trying to grab her purse with the other hand, sir.”

Tama and Pochi had grabbed the would-be attacker’s other hand.

I see...so he was attempting two crimes at once.

“Liza, could you find a guard and flag them down?”

“Of course, sir.”

While Liza was off looking for help, we tied up the cursing men and handed them off once she returned with a guard.

“Master, I am terribly sorry. You entrusted me with this money, and I failed to properly protect it.”

“No need to worry about that. But it does seem like there are a lot of pickpockets here, so it might be best to split it between two purses.”

“Yes, master.”

Adin nodded meekly.

After that, whenever we spotted the likes of any purse-snatchers or luggage thieves, sergeants Tama and Pochi sprang into action, and we wound up cleaning up crime on the streets of the royal capital.

“Hey there, little lady, interested in having your love life read?”

A sketchy-looking fortune-teller called out to us from a shady shop between stalls.

Arisa looked the tiniest bit interested, but quickly responded, “No, I’m good,” and kept walking. She had probably noticed that the fortune-teller didn’t have any skills like “Divination” or “Foresight.”

“Young man, are your shoulders or head achy? We’ll fix you right up in our spiritual healing center.”

A pretty lady in a low-cut outfit wrapped her arm around mine and pressed against me.

I thought the claim of “healing” might be a front for more intimate services, but she actually did have relevant skills like “Magic Heal” and “First Aid.”

I had them, too, but she had a niche that was different from potions or magic.

“No thanks, I’m not really achy.”

“Is that right? Well, if you find yourself feeling under the weather, come by anytime...”

“Sure, thanks.”

Feeling slightly regretful, I kept walking past the stall.

“Honestly, you’re way too easily charmed by pretty ladies!”

“No cheating.”

Arisa and Mia grabbed me by either arm and dragged me away. Lulu and the beastfolk girls were close behind.

Nana and her sisters were gathered in an area up ahead, looking at something.

“Master, there is a bridge above the city, I report!”

Nana pointed at a bridge-like structure on an arch foundation.

“That’s an aqueduct.”

“So that’s what they look like.”

“Huh, it sorta looks like some ancient Roman stuff.”

Lulu and Arisa looked up in interest, too. The latter was probably referring to those famous ruins in southern France.

“What is an aqueduct? I inquire.”

“An aqueduct is like a bridge that carries drinking water from the source to people’s homes.”

The source of fresh water in the royal capital was in the royal castle; there were six aqueducts that stretched from the castle to the city walls in straight lines. In the wealthiest neighborhoods, there were a few places with ring-shaped aqueducts in concentric circles from the castle as well. The ring-shaped ones were thinner, with pipes that provided running water to some houses.

The lower-class areas used both aqueducts and canals, and some areas also had wells.

“That’s...”

Liza’s eyes narrowed.

Following her gaze, I saw a weaselman merchant riding a hideous golem carriage.

She once told me that the orangescale tribe village where she was born was wiped out by weasemen, so she probably still held some ill feelings toward them.

“Liza, let’s go.”

I prompted Liza to start moving again, and we went back to shopping.

Since Nana’s sisters had gotten most of their necessities, we moved on to the all-important business of clothes shopping.

“Master! There’s a picture book store!”

The younger kids beckoned me over to a bookstore.

They didn’t have any spellbooks or alchemy-related books, but I let each kid pick out a book they wanted, and I picked up a picture scroll of famous sights in the royal capital. The majority of Nana’s sisters preferred picture books, but the eldest, Adin, chose a book on philosophy, and the third sister, Tria, picked a cookbook.

“Clothing stores.”

“Aah, that street over there?”

The street was lined with stores dealing in ready-made clothes, secondhand clothes, and so on.

“Let’s go, everyone!”

““““Yes, Arisa.””””

Arisa led the homunculi sisters off to look for clothing.

Mia and Lulu were close behind, followed by the beastfolk girls and me.

Girls really take a long time shopping.

Rather than trying to keep up with them the whole time, I eventually went outside and sat on a wooden crate on the side of the road to wait.

“Mew...”

“I’m pooped, sir.”

Tama and Pochi were understandably exhausted after Arisa and the others

had played dress-up with them for so long.

Evidently, Liza was the current target of their fashion attack.

I passed the time by petting Tama's and Pochi's heads as they slumped in my lap.

"Something smells sweet, sir." Suddenly, Pochi raised her head and sniffed the air. "Over there! Sir."

She pointed down the street, where a food cart had opened up near the corner.

"Shall we go do a little taste-test?"

"Aye-aye!"

"Taste-testing is important, sir!"

The pair suddenly recovered their energy, and we walked over to the food cart.

There was a park right nearby, though we hadn't been able to see it from where we were sitting. There were plenty of food carts near the park entrance selling snacks.

"Young master! How about a famous royal capital galette? We've got sweet jam galettes for the little ladies, too."

"No meat, sir?"

"Sorry, the only two fillings we have are leafy greens and jam."

"Too baaad...?"

The two meat-loving girls looked disappointed, then ordered jam-filled galettes anyway. I decided to order the leafy green galette.

"Sure thing! Leafy greens are one copper coin apiece; jam is one large copper coin."

Jam seemed to be relatively expensive.

"I filled yours with plenty of jam, little ladies."

"Yaaay..."

“Sir!”

I exchanged the coins for the galettes.

“Trés bieeen...?”

“Sweet and yummy, sir.”

Pochi’s and Tama’s faces were soon covered in jam as they munched on the galettes.

I took a bite of the leafy greens galette. The filling was sweet and salty, possibly pickled, and fairly tasty. Something about the flavor made me want some hot sake.

“Aaah, there you are! Of course you went off to get snacks!”

The rest of the group spotted us and came over, having finished their shopping.

“Do you want some, too? It’s pretty tasty.”

“Let’s see...”

Arisa wiped a bit of jam from Pochi’s messy cheeks and licked it off her finger.

“Wow, that’s sweet. Say, mister, is there a lot of sugar in this?”

“Not a lot, but we do use sugar.”

That explained why the jam galettes were more expensive.

“Huh! I’m surprised you can use something so expensive at a food cart.”

“The price of sugar has gone down lately. I heard it’s because trading has gotten safer for ships in the south seas because of some famous pirate hunter named Pen or Pon or something.”

Arisa looked at me. She seemed a little proud.

“You heard the man, Arisa.”

“Hee-hee...”

“It’s about lunchtime now. Want to eat in the park?”

We bought a few more galettes, then went around to the other food stalls

near the park, buying more food.

Meat seemed to be a little more expensive in the royal capital: Skewers and meat stew were all being sold for three or even five times as much as they would sell for in Labyrinth City.

The galettes and buckwheat flour–based snacks were much more reasonable.

One of the more unusual offerings was a fried dish that looked like gnocchi made with buckwheat flour. Most were soy-or salt-flavored, with a few miso versions as well.

“There’s a lot of buckwheat flour, but I don’t see any soba, or noodles at all for that matter.”

“That’s a good point.”

Thinking about it, I realized that while I’d seen plenty of short macaroni-like pasta and gnocchi, I didn’t remember seeing any long soba-style noodles. Surely it must have occurred to someone to stretch them out into noodles, and I imagined that one or two heroes or reincarnations must have spread the idea at some point.

I’ll have to ask the gourmet noble duo about it sometime.

I remembered seeing soba noodles wrapped up and tempura-fried back in Japan. As long as noodles weren’t against some kind of fantasy-world taboo, I would have to make soba for everyone at some point.

“Want to eat over there?”

We sat down on some benches near a water fountain to have a light meal.

“Wow, this is actually pretty good. I guess it’s worth trying something new once in a while.”

“These tendon skewers are good, too.”

“Tough and yummy...”

“Pochi likes regular skewers better, sir.”

The beastfolk girls went for beef skewers as usual, but the other kids preferred the sweet jam galettes.

“Tria likes sweet foods best. What about you, Lulu?”

“I like sweets, too, but it’s nice to be able to try lots of different flavors.”

“Don’t worryyy...?”

“We’ll finish whatever you can’t eat, sir.”

Tama’s and Pochi’s glutton sensors activated at Tria and Lulu’s conversation, and they immediately moved to intercept any scraps.

“Mm-mm-mm...mm?”

Mia, who was enjoying a jam galette, looked up.

There was jam stuck to her cheek, so I wiped it off with a handkerchief lest it get on her long hair.

“Music.”

Mia was looking at a girl who was pounding out a rhythm on the rim of the fountain, and at some children who were dancing to the beat.

Though it looked like she was hitting it at random, she was actually creating a proper song.

It must be a famous melody in the area.

“Are they street performers?”

“I think they’re just playing around, no?”

“Fun is important.”

With a longer sentence than usual, Mia produced an instrument from her Fairy Pack and began to play along to the girl’s rhythm.

“Tama will dance, tooo...?”

“Dance fairy Pochi’s soul is all fiery, sir!”

Tama and Pochi joined the other dancing children.

Some of the other girls were nervous at first, but joined one after another when they saw the pair dancing.

“Hey, there’s more of them now.”

At some point, an unfamiliar gentleman had set up a little ways away and started playing along with a large instrument. He was just as good as Mia—no, possibly even better.

“Why don’t you dance, too, Arisa?”

“But of course! Let us go, Madam Lulu.”

“Master, we wish to go dance, too, I report.”

Following Nana, most of her sisters joined the dance.

“You, too, master!” Arisa cried.

“All right, all right. Let’s go, Liza.”

I got up to join along with Liza.

It was only a few magical minutes, but we all enjoyed attempting to dance to the music.

When the girl wrapped things up with a DA-DA-DAH, Mia and the gentleman ended the song along with her.

“Satisfied.”

I handed Mia a clean handkerchief for her puffed-up nostrils.

When I glanced over at the gentleman, he gave a graceful bow, got into a carriage, and left. I guess he was a passing musician.



“Where are we going next?”

“Since we finished most of our shopping, let’s go to a museum.”

I’d learned about the royal museum, which included a gemstone exhibit, at one of the viceroy’s wife’s tea parties. It was right on the other side of the park.

We took a leisurely stroll in that direction, walking off our lunch at the same time.

“The flowers are late to bloom this year.”

“You’re right, dear.”

I overheard an elderly couple talking as we walked by.

The trees along the path were all sakura trees, but none of them were budding yet.

“These are all sakura, right? I wonder when they bloom?”

I unfurled the royal capital picture scroll I’d just bought to see if it had the answer to Arisa’s question.

“In an average year, they start blooming right around now, and hit full bloom right around New Year’s.”

The cherry blossom trees in the royal capital were evidently grown from seedlings that the ancestral king Yamato received from the elves.

While we were talking about this, the entrance to the royal museum came into view on the other side of the park.

“I hear something, sir.”

“Clacky clackyyy...?”

The noise was coming from an intersection on the right side of the street that separated the park from the royal museum.

“What’s that, I wonder?”

“It sounds like a carriage.”

“But I do not hear hooves, I report.”

The light on my radar showed the vehicle approaching too quickly to be a normal carriage.

At the same time, I heard young voices whooping gleefully and screams from other people.

“The sound is getting closer, I report.”

Huit tried to jump into the street to check, but I grabbed her by the collar and pulled her back.

“Outta the way!”

“Woo-hooo!”

A runaway carriage skidded into view at the intersection, careering around the corner.

It was an open-style golem carriage with no horses.

“Waaaah!”

“Eeeek!”

The pedestrians who’d been looking around for the source of the noise shrieked and ran away when they saw the golem carriage speeding toward them.

“We’ll run you over, plebs!”

“Bah-ha-ha-ha!”

There were four young noble boys riding the golem carriage, sneering at the fleeing crowd.

A few people didn’t get out of the way in time, but the beastfolk girls quickly rescued them without my needing to do anything.

Without slowing down, the golem carriage sped away down the street.

“I never thought I’d see such reckless delinquents in this world,” Arisa muttered.

“What in the world was that?”

“The idiot sons of some high-class nobles.”

“Whoa, careful. If one of their family’s servants heard you say something like that, they’d have you turned into a criminal slave in a heartbeat.”

“Heaven forbid. The best thing to do is avoid getting involved with those sorts.”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up some chatter from the pedestrians.

“They’ve been running wild in this area a lot lately.”

“The guards don’t stop them?”

“Not a chance. Even if they arrested one of those rich kids, their parents would have them freed in no time.”

“I heard some people who got hit and seriously hurt a while back tried to bring it up to the government, but instead they got in trouble for ‘jumping in the way of a vehicle’ and had to pay for the so-called repairs of the horseless carriage.”

Whew, that’s pretty depressing.

“What a bunch of spoiled nobles. Viva la revolución!”

“Yeah, really.”

Absentmindedly responding to Arisa, I searched the map and made a note of the delinquent nobles’ names.

It didn’t seem like reporting them to the judicial branch would do much good, but maybe I could talk to the king and prime minister about it next time I visited the castle as Nanashi the Hero.



“Even the building itself looks like a jewel.”

The separate building of the royal museum that housed the gemstone exhibit was engraved with patterns that looked like gems and rings; evidently it was a popular place with higher-class ladies.

We presented our identification and paid the entrance fee of one silver coin per person. Commoners needed a noble in good standing to vouch for them.

I assume the entry process was so complicated because the exhibit contained highly valuable items.

“Pretty...?”

“Sparkly, sir.”

“Mm. Beautiful.”

The gemstone exhibit displayed all kinds of jewels and jewelry in glass cases. “Light Magic” was used to provide the ideal lighting to make the gems shine.

“They’re so lovely, it’s almost blinding just to look at them.”

Lulu was squinting a little as she gazed at a dazzlingly bright jewel. She was as beautiful as any gemstone herself, to the point where I murmured, “Yes, very

lovely” without thinking.

“Right?” Lulu didn’t seem embarrassed at all.

She must have thought I was talking about the jewel, too. Her eyes were glittering just like gems.

Arisa could stand to learn a lesson in femininity from her, instead of wondering aloud how much the gems were worth.

“Master, say it to me, too.”

“Me too.”

Arisa and Mia, who had caught on to the real meaning of my words, pointed at themselves hopefully.

“Y-Y-yep. Very lovely.”

“Come on, say it like you mean it!”

“Mrrr.”

I reminded everyone to keep their voices down so as not to disturb anyone else, and we continued enjoying our tour of the exhibit.

Since there were some priceless artifacts on display, guards were stationed throughout the museum. The glass cases were also set up behind dividers made from poles and ropes, to prevent viewers from getting close enough to touch the glass.

“This diamond spearhead looks very strong.”

“A spear made of diamond would be very sturdy, I agree.”

Liza and Nana talked among themselves as they looked at a piece called “Radiance of the Sacred Mountain.”

“There are a lot of really big gems, though, huh?”

“Brilliaaant...?”

“Very, very great, sir.”

There were plenty of gems the size of eggs, and even rugby ball-sized rubies and emeralds.

Most of the other visitors were groups of well-dressed women.

“The Heaven’s Teardrops are still perhaps the most beautiful of all.”

“Indeed, it is as if someone captured the light of a star in a beautiful stone.”

“I hope someone proposes to me with a gem like this someday...”

A gaggle of young women from lower-class noble families were gazing at a Heaven’s Teardrop from Ishrallie.

There was also a small unicorn statue made from alua, the same substance that composed Heaven’s Teardrops.

“Aluaaa...?”

“It’s a yoony-corn, sir!”

Tama and Pochi gazed up at the statue on its pedestal.

“My Tama statue is cuter, sir.”

“My Pochi statue’s cute, tooo...?”

Tama and Pochi showed each other the sparkling statues that I had gotten made along with some tableware while we were staying in Bolenan Forest.

“The sparkling statues are very cute, I declare. Does Nana have one? I inquire.”

In response to her youngest sister Huit’s question, Nana produced her baby chick statue.

““““Larvae!””””

All the sisters clustered around the statue.

I guess they all have similar tastes to Nana, too.

“I request a transfer.”

“Negative, I respond.”

Nana rejected Huit’s request without hesitation.

“Master, Nana is being mean, I report.”

“Now, now, don’t fight. I’ll make some for the rest of you sometime soon.”

Although I didn't have any spare alua, I'd find a way to acquire some other gemstone.

"There are a lot of other carvings, too."

"Mm. Pretty."

The youngest girls seemed to like the carved jewels.

They had seen plenty of carvings I'd made with the Earth Magic spell Create Stone Object, but I guess there was something different about these ones.

"This one seems to be the most popular."

"Wow, it's so pretty!"

It was a fire burning inside of a crystal.

"A fire crystal! I wonder where the black onyx is?"

"Wasn't there a black crystal of some kind in the first room?"

Arisa was joking about some old PC game, but Lulu answered her literally. "That ain't it," she grumbled in a fake Kansai dialect.

"Master, do you know how it is made? I inquire."

"It looks like they hollowed out a crystal and put in some fire stones mixed with dark stones. They seem to have used wind stones to make the fire move, too."

According to the plaque in front of it, it was created by a legendary Jewel Magic user named Gemma. Judging by the Latin name, I suspected that a reincarnation or hero was involved.



“Rainbow colors...?”

“It’s a spinny pole, sir.”

There was an array of stones that seemed to have been altered with an Earth Magic spell like Create Stone Object.

A young curator who was standing watch near the piece barely suppressed a chuckle at Tama’s and Pochi’s reactions.

“The next ones are by different artists.”

“Looks like they’re by pupils and modern makers.”

The works by the master artist Gemma all retained high transparency, but most of the works by his pupils and contemporary artists were less transparent, losing some of their beauty as gems.

“This statue is weird, sir.”

It was a statue of a naked woman carved from a larger statue, but it wasn’t exactly artistic.

I herded the group along to the next area, since it wouldn’t be a good influence on them.

“...WHAT?!”

Just as we were starting to go around the corner, I heard a young man bellowing from the direction we’d just come from.

I turned and saw four well-dressed nobles gathered around the curator who’d almost laughed earlier.

“As the fifth son of the Merkray line, I demand access to the jewel created by Master Gemma that was lent to the museum by the Merkray family! You insult our family name by refusing to cooperate, plebian!”

One of them seemed to be a chronic complainer.

There were two guards nearby, but they weren’t getting involved, sticking to their stations instead. They were staying at their stations, probably worried that the noble boys were a diversion.

“Aren’t those the delinquents from before? Talk about your typical idiot nobles. Wanna knock ’em down a peg?”

“They’ll just take it out on us.” I shrugged lightly. “More importantly, could you and Liza go back up the guards, please?”

“Okey-dokey.”

“Of course, sir.”

Arisa and Liza sprinted down the hallway.

“Nana, you follow them with Adin and the other sisters. Lulu, you wait here with the other kids.”

I led the army of eight beauties toward the commotion.

“I will happily crush them, if that is what you wish, master.”

“No, don’t do that. We’re just going to keep them distracted until more guards show up.”

Adin seemed surprisingly quick to jump to violence.

“Adin, follow my lead.”

“Yes, master.”

With deliberately loud footsteps, I headed back toward the area we’d just left.

“Is that the miracle jewel made by Master Gemma?!”

I used my “Amplification,” “Acting,” and even “Fabrication” skills to get the young delinquents’ attention.

Ignoring them as they glared at me, I loudly led Nana and company toward the fire crystal.

“Oooh! There really is fire burning inside the crystal!”

“It’s wonderful, master.”

“It is wonderful, I agree.”

Adin and company agreed in flat, monotone voices.

Shoot, I should've kept Arisa in this group.

"Hey, you!"

The noble delinquents pulled away from the curator and advanced toward me instead.

"What is it, good sir?"

"You're being way too damn loud!"

I guess they're not very self-aware.

"Oh dear, I'm sorry," I apologized innocently. "Please forgive my poor manners."

"This is the problem with you stupid bumpkins..."

The delinquents started to turn back toward the curator, so I quickly kept the conversation going.

"Even a bumpkin like myself can see how beautiful this fire crystal is, though."

The young nobleman's eyes swiveled back toward me.

I had thrown the topic out there since I'd heard him say that his family lent the fire crystal to the museum; fortunately, it caught his attention successfully.

"It must belong to a very prestigious family, I'm sure."

I made a point of sounding impressed to tickle the brash noble's pride, and he took the bait.

"You're exactly right. That priceless treasure belongs to my family, the noble house of Viscount Merkray, and has been handed down since the days of the ancestral king."

The man puffed up his chest proudly, prompting his friends to start praising his family, too.

"A truly great bloodline naturally attracts equally great treasures," he continued boastfully, his mood clearly improved.

Once I saw on my radar that Arisa and the others were returning with guards, I knew I didn't have to keep buying time much longer.

I opened my mouth to praise him arbitrarily and wrap up the conversation, but instead the youngest sister, Huit, blurted out something unfortunate.

“Master, does that mean they receive a lot of bribes? I inquire.”

“Excuse me?! You dare imply that my family has amassed its wealth through illicit means, you wench?!”

The delinquent noble turned on Huit and moved to grab her, his rage flaring up again instantly.

“Wait a minute, please. Let me apologize for my friend’s rudeness.”

“Don’t touch me, cretin!”

I stretched out my arm to protect Huit, and the delinquent noble crashed into me. Instead of resisting, I let myself get knocked backward, where Adin and some of the others caught me.

As I enjoyed the soft sensation, I looked at the guards, who were coming around the corner. The man in the lead seemed to be the director of the museum.

“Lord Merkray! You’re causing trouble again?!”

“Tch, what a pain. Let’s get out of here!”

The delinquent noble hightailed from the museum as soon as he saw the director, who gave chase immediately, along with the guards.

“Are you all right?” the curator asked me.

“Yes, thank you. My friends here caught me.”

“Master, we ran into the director, so we brought him along, too.”

“Thanks, Arisa. That was a big help.”

Arisa and I high-fived.

“Th-thank you very much for your help.”

The curator, who seemed to have caught on to the fact that I was trying to draw attention away from him, bowed his head gratefully.

> Title Acquired: “Jester”

> Title Acquired: “Gem Lover”



“This area seems to lead to the main part of the royal museum.”

Having finished our tour of the gemstone exhibit, we headed through a connecting passage to the royal museum’s main building.

“Looks like they’ve got lots of different stuff on display.”

“Master, there is a suggested route here.”

We decided to take our tour in order of the map Liza found.

“Instruments.”

“It looks like they have instruments from both the Shiga Kingdom and neighboring nations.”

There weren’t that many different kinds, but one did catch my eye.

“An electric guitar?”

“Yeah, it says it belonged to a past hero.”

It appeared to be a bass, not a guitar. I doubt they were able to perform without an amp, though.

“Master! I found larvae!”

““““Larvae!””””

Nana had spotted a group of small children from the royal academy preschool on a field trip.

Nana and all her sisters nearly jumped into action to dote on the students, but fortunately Mia stood in their way and said, “No,” preventing it from turning into a big incident.

“Whoo-hoo! Look at those muscles!”

Arisa was practically huffing in admiration at a line of nude statues.

“None of them are as nice as master’s collarbone,” I heard Lulu mumble, with the help of my “Keen Hearing” skill.

When she said things like that, it made it easier to believe that she was Arisa's sister.

"Byooti-ful..."

Tama was gazing in admiration at a sculpture of a buffalo called "Ste Fani's Leap."

It was a remarkably lifelike statue, with eye-catching touches in the sculpting of the clay.

"Now say 'Ste Fani' after 'beautiful,'" Arisa requested for some reason, but Tama seemed too entranced with the statue to hear her.

"You like that one?"

"Aye."

Tama nodded and kept staring at it intently.

I decided to leave her alone, since she seemed to want to look at it for a while.

Just as I turned to leave, an elderly man standing near the statue spoke to Tama.

"Ho-ho, you've got a good eye, young missy."

My AR information revealed that he was the sculptor of the buffalo statue.

"Would you like to see more sculptures like this?"

"Aye!"

"Then come visit me anytime."

The elderly man handed a card to me, Tama's guardian.

It was sort of like a business card, with his name and address written on it.

"Thank you very much."

"Thaaanks...?"

After we thanked the man, he walked away with a cane in one hand.

"Looks like this next part is a history of weapons and armor."

“Yes, although the magic weapons are just visual replicas.”

That made sense, since they still had practical use.

“Is that a little giant’s weapon, perhaps?”

Liza was looking at a giant double-edged ax some eight feet long with the blade over six feet wide. The black ax seemed to be some kind of cursed weapon.

According to the information on my AR display, it was a magic weapon with exceptionally high attack power. It could even steal the magic and stamina of the target and give it to the wielder. I wasn’t sure how efficient it was, but it definitely seemed pretty impressive.

“Awfully big, isn’t it?” a curator said to us with a smile. “This ax was used by Sir Gouen of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen back when he was an adventurer in the Saga Empire.”

“He must be pretty amazing to swing such a big ax,” Arisa remarked, sounding impressed. “Do you think you could use it, master?”

“I could probably lift it, but it’d be physically impossible for me to swing it around, considering how light I am.”

I wonder if I could use the inertia to my advantage if I let it swing me around, though?

Thanking the curator, I moved on to the next area.

“Master, look! Sir!”

I left Arisa and company looking at the ax to go see why Pochi was calling me.

“It’s a samurai display, sir!”

Pochi waved her arms and tail excitedly.

At the word *samurai*, Arisa came running over.

“That’s a lot of Western-style katana. There were a bunch in the old-capital museum, too... If they’re so popular, I wonder why not many people use them?”

She had a point: The only katana users I knew were Kajiro and Ayaume.

“That’s true,” I agreed, searching the royal capital map for katana.

A few people came up as hits. They were all from the Saga Empire, mainly adventurers and martial artists with titles like “Sin Kaage Style: Licensed” and “Tennenrii Sin Style: Initiate.”

“Tama, there’s ninja scrolls over here, too!”

“Lemme seee...”

Tama, who was still contentedly gazing at the buffalo statue, came zooming over at Arisa’s words.

“Can’t read ’eeem...?”

“Then allow Ninja Master Arisa to read for thee.” Arisa put on a sage-like voice and began to read. “The basics are modeled after the five elements: *mokuton* for wood, *katon* for fire, *doton* for earth, *suiton* for water, and *kinton* for metal...”

“Ton-ton...?”

“Sweeton sounds yummy, sir.”

“Basically, there’s a bunch of cool disturbance *jutsu*. There’s even ninja arts where you can use birds and small animals like a tamer.”

Arisa seemed to have realized that Pochi and Tama couldn’t follow all the unfamiliar words, and she switched to a simpler explanation.

“Boriing...?”

“Not at all! These are just the basics! Why, Clarke once said that ‘any sufficiently advanced Ninjutsu is indistinguishable from magic’!”

Arisa, that was about technology, not Ninjutsu.

“If you master flipping tatami mats, you can flip the ground itself, or move from shadow to shadow like a Shadow Magic user, or tie people up with shadow ropes! Plus, you can dig tunnels and move around with *doton*, and set whole castles on fire with *katon*. Also, there’s throwing stars and *taijutsu* and...”

“Don’t get too carried away,” I told Arisa as she started ranting about fictional Ninjutsu. Then I left to check on the other kids.

“Did you find something interesting?”

“Master...!”

Lulu was keenly inspecting a booth that displayed the history of Fire Rods.

It showed the changes from when Fire Rods were first developed in ancient times to their modern form.

“Huh, they’ve been around for a pretty long time.”

The exhibit said that they were originally created to make up for a shortage of Fire Magic users.

“Doesn’t this one look like the tip of your Fire Rod rifle or Fireburst Gun, master?”

“You’re right. I guess people in the old days came up with similar ideas to mine.”

I had improved the accuracy of my Fire Rod Gun by making the Fire Shots spin as they were fired.

Some of the older Fire Rods had rifling barrels near the fire stone, or were fashioned with the fire stone carved into a helix shape. The modern style seemed to favor making the helix shape with alchemy or spells like the Earth Magic spell Create Stone Object.

“It seems like older Fire Rods weren’t very accurate.”

“Looks that way.”

Aside from the horizontal rotation methods displayed, images described other methods that had been attempted in the past.

One particularly interesting rod called the “Three Divine Flowers” had the end split into three prongs, each with its own Fire Rod mechanism at the tip.

“Ooh, a Fire Rod that could fire three shots at once? I wonder if people used them for triple burst attacks?”

“Mew...?”

“What’s a triple burst attack, sir?”

“Well, to put it simply...”

Arisa explained to Pochi and Tama that it meant that pulling the trigger once would automatically produce three shots.

But since she also mixed in some fictional aspects for fun...

“I see, so it was one shot for the head and two for the heart. That certainly seems like an effective way to defeat an opponent.”

“Amazing, sir! Pochi wants a triple burst attack, too, sir!”

“Tama too...?”

The beastfolk girls seemed to have absorbed the concept of a “double tap” shot for incapacitating an opponent as part of their understanding of a triple burst attack.

“I wonder if it would be possible with Spellblade Shots?”

“Rapid-fiiire...?”

“Good idea, sir! We just have to go *pa-pa-pow*, sir!”

At first I was going to clear up their misunderstanding, but they seemed so excited about the topic of doing a triple burst attack with Spellblade Shot that I didn’t want to ruin their fun.

“We’ll have to give it a try sometime.”

“Aye-aye...”

“Yes, sir! We’ll train lots and lots, sir!”

Tama gave a languid cheer and Pochi an enthusiastic shout in response to Liza’s words.

From the sound of things, I would have to bring them to our teleport point on the outskirts of the royal capital to do some shooting practice.



“The downtown area isn’t exactly a tourist attraction, is it?”

Arisa raised her eyebrows as she looked around.

After we left the museum, we went on a stroll toward the west gate, but Arisa

was right: It didn't seem to be designed for sightseeing.

There were a lot of recent refugees from Lessau County, many of whom were living in tents or simple shacks built in parks or empty lots near the wall. Of course, there were a fair amount of poor citizens who'd already been living in the slums, too.

"Yeah. We'll be at the west gate soon, so we can get on the main street there and head back."

We quickly walked through downtown.

Just as one might expect, we were approached a few times by some unpleasantly leering groups, but the beastfolk girls fended them off easily.

"Mew...?"

"It's the princess who was on the airship, sir."

Just as the west gate was coming into view, Tama and Pochi pointed at a carriage and exclaimed.

It was being guarded by nearly twenty knights, and I could see through the window that Duke Vistall's first wife and youngest daughter were inside.

The last time I had seen them, they were fleeing with the airship attackers, but I guess they ended up getting caught by the guards.

"Mew!"

Tama's ears shot up under her hood.

I glanced around and saw a few sketchy figures watching the guarded carriage from a distance. According to my map information, some were spies from the Saga Empire and Parion Provence—and a few were members of the demon lord-worshipping group Wings of Freedom, which lurked in the western side of the continent.

The former had incited the incident with the demons when Lady Helmina was visiting Labyrinth City.

I had disguised myself as the hero's attendant Kuro and wiped out the Wings of Freedom base that had been in the trade city Tartumina, the gateway to the

Shiga Kingdom, but I guess the insidious group had invaded yet again.

Before I could search the map for other Wings of Freedom members, my radar lit up with countless red dots.

“Master...”

Following Liza’s urgent gaze, I saw several smoke bombs rolling toward the carriage, producing white smoke.

The information on my AR display said that these attackers were from the royal capital criminal guild Snake Legs. It used a similar method to that of the group that had gone after the floormaster spoils before, but it seemed to be from a different organization entirely.

I couldn’t just let a crime unfold in front of me, so I decided to stealthily help out.

Using Magic Hand, I grabbed the smoke bombs and put them all in my Storage.

The smoke they had already produced was still there, but it wasn’t enough to completely conceal everything, making it easier for the guards to cut down the criminal guild attackers.

“Satou, look!”

Mia pointed at a human who was beginning to change form.

A demon.

One of the Wings of Freedom members must have used a short horn to turn into a demon.

GZRROOOOOWN.

A lesser demon that looked like a twisted cross between a gorilla and a rhinoceros howled toward the sky.

“Yahoooo!”

“We’ll run you down, commoners!”

Just then, I heard familiar voices coming from the nearby intersection.

“Out of the waaay!”

“Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

A golem carriage I’d seen before came careering around the corner.

The delinquent nobles were hooting and sneering at the fleeing pedestrians, but their faces froze when they saw the smoke on the street and the lesser demon standing in the middle of their path.

Considering how quickly and recklessly they were driving, there was no way they were going to be able to brake fast enough.

“Wait, st—”

“Oh shi—”

Before anyone could finish a single sentence, the delinquent nobles’ runaway golem carriage crashed into the lesser demon.

The front of the carriage crumpled, and it flipped forward. This world didn’t even have traffic laws, never mind seat belts; the nobles went flying from the carriage.

I used Magic Hand to help enough that they wouldn’t die on impact, but I wasn’t too concerned if they broke a few bones.

Hopefully this would teach them a lesson in safe driving.

“Now’s our chance! Finish off that demon!”

The guards charged at the demon, which had been thrown to the ground by the crash.

GZRROOOOOWN.

The lesser demon howled with rage, pulling itself up and swatting the guards away.

“Don’t let your guards down!” the captain shouted. “The demon can still fight!”

“Master, a larvae is in danger, I report.”

Whoops. I had let myself get distracted by the delinquent nobles.

“Liza, come with me. Nana, all of you, keep an eye out for criminal reinforcements!”

I took only Liza with me to defeat the demon.

If we went in with a big group, the guards might mistake us for more enemies.

“I am Sir Pendragon, hereditary knight of the Muno Barony! Leave this demon to me!”

Shouting loudly, I pushed my way through the crowd of guards to get in front of the demon.

Since I wasn’t carrying my Fairy Sword today, I picked up an iron short sword from the ground and used it to parry the lesser demon’s arm as it swung toward me.

“Haaah!”

Liza charged in behind me and stabbed the lesser demon through its jaw.

“On the side!”

“It’s a monster with chopsticks, sir!”

As Tama and Pochi exclaimed, another demon appeared through the white clouds of smoke.

Covered in silver scales, it was around the same size as the lesser demon we had just defeated, but it definitely looked much stronger.

Sure enough, my AR display revealed that it was a level-50 intermediate demon.

“YAAAAAAAAAAH!”

As the silver demon came toward me, a shadow flitted toward it from the side, and they both disappeared from sight.

Immediately after, the wall of a nearby building broke open, sending dirt and shrapnel everywhere.

I had only caught a quick glimpse, but the shadow appeared to be a giant swordsman.

GZRROOOOWN.

The lesser demon Liza had skewered with her Magic Spear began fighting back with its arms and horns, so we both backstepped away from it.

I guess some demons don't even die if their brains are destroyed.

"Liza, I'm leaving this one to you."

"Yes, sir."

I went to help the swordsman I'd encountered earlier.

There was a loud, dull boom from beyond the broken wall, and the swordsman jumped back out, dust flying around him.

Wow, he's ripped.

The firm muscles I could see bulging through his ripped clothes were very impressive.

He had a large two-handed sword on his shoulders, and he was glaring alertly through the hole in the wall.

This swordsman was level 51 and a member of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen at that.

Red light flashed on the giant two-handed sword, turning into a dazzling Spellblade effect.

"Come at me!"

Just as the muscular swordsman shouted through the wall, the silver demon burst out through the cloud of dust. Its adamantite-like blue-silver claws flashed as it sped toward the man.

"'Burst Hacker'!"

That must be the swordsman's special attack. His sword carved a red half-circle in the air as he swung, striking the silver-scaled demon down to the ground.

They both moved so fast that they were hard to follow with my eyes, but right before the demon's claws reached the man, his sword came down from above and crashed into its head.

“Tch...stubborn bastard. Can’t believe it survived my Secret Technique.”

The muscular swordsman prepared to attack the demon again as it lay facedown.

ZWROOOOWN.

With a move reminiscent of a break-dancing technique, the silver demon popped back up, sending cobblestone pieces flying everywhere. The beefy swordsman jumped back with unexpected agility, deflecting both the shrapnel and the silver demon’s spinning kick with a swing of his sword.

The silver-scaled demon spun, landed on its feet, and charged right back toward the knight.

“Hmph!”

Using centrifugal force, the burly swordsman swung his sword around and landed it squarely on the charging demon.

The silver-scaled demon went flying toward a nearby wall like a baseball and nearly crashed right through, but righted itself at the last second and landed on the wall, clinging to it sideways like a certain arachnid fellow from American comics.

Its silver scales stood on end and turned into sharp spikes.

Then the spikes rained down toward the brawny swordsman, who was still recovering from his giant sword swing.

“Dodge!”

Hearing my shout, the man dashed forward without even checking his surroundings.

As I watched him, I picked up a fallen shield at my feet and tossed it, deflecting the flying scales that nearly caught the swordsman.

ZWROOOOOOWN.

The silver demon jumped from the wall—not toward the beefy swordsman, but toward me, since I’d blocked his attack.

Razor-sharp claws came flashing toward me.

“Uh-oh, careful there.”

I used the iron sword in my hands to parry the attack, pushing against its scales.

The sword I’d picked up was apparently a cheap one: Metal scraped off it like carrot skin against a peeler.

The sparks and flecks of metal flying off the sword were pretty, but in a matter of seconds the sword was reduced to a handle.

I guess I should’ve at least used the “Spellblade” skill.

Meanwhile, the silver demon tried to shoot more scales at me. I dropped toward the floor and kicked the demon into the air.

“HIYAAAAAAH!”

The brawny swordsman leaped forward and swung his two-handed sword magnificently, hitting the silver demon squarely in the chest.

The demon had no way to brace itself since it was still in the air from my kick, and it was sent crashing toward a nearby wall.

It tried to land sideways on the wall again, but this time the wall itself broke on impact, sending the demon tumbling inside.

“Thanks for the hand back there, kid. You’re not half bad.”

“I appreciate your kind words.”

I didn’t love being called “kid,” but I thanked him anyway, since it seemed like he meant well.

“I’m Gouen. From the Shiga Eight.”

“My name is Satou Pendragon, hereditary knight and vassal of Baron Muno.”

“So you’re that Pendragon fella Mina was talking about, huh? Funny.”

The brawny swordsman—I mean, Sir Gouen—gave a macho grin as he referred to his colleague Lady Helmina by a casual nickname.

ZWROOOOWN.

The demon came flying from the building with a howl.

Once it landed, nearly a hundred silver scales floated off it and began circling around its body. It was probably supposed to be offense and defense in one move.

“Follow my lead, Satou. Don’t die on me, now!”

With that, Sir Gouen took off running.

Well, it would be rude not to take him up on his offer. I picked another sword off the ground and ran in a diagonal slant next to the swordsman.

The silver-scaled demon charged toward Sir Gouen, evidently choosing to attack rather than wait and defend itself.

Some of the floating scales formed into a chain and flew toward us.

Sir Gouen used “Spellblade” on his two-handed sword and knocked the chain of scales away, lunging toward the demon itself through the scales.

The deflected chain of scales hit the ground, bounced back up—and flew toward Sir Gouen’s back like they were attached to him by a giant elastic band.

I used “Blink” to catch up to them and brandished the iron sword.

“Hunh!”

Sir Gouen’s body swelled for just a moment, and I saw his defense stat go way up in my AR display.

It seemed to be an effect of his “Indestructible Body” skill.

I was somewhat curious about how much this hardened his defenses, but I resisted the pull of curiosity and swung my sword, slicing up the scales that were flying toward his back.



Learning from my prior misstep, I made sure to activate “Spellblade” in the instant that I cut the scales, to prevent the sword from being damaged.

Using “Spellblade” with iron swords is a little bit of a pain, since they don’t conduct magic very well.

“HUOOOOORYAAAAH!”

Sir Gouen bellowed as he charged into the field of floating silver scales.

His armor cracked, and blood went flying into the air.

But still he pressed forward, closing in on the demon and swinging his two-handed sword with all his might.

Red shards of Spellblade scattered, and sparks flew where the floating scales hit the sword.

ZWRODDDYN.

Beyond Sir Gouen’s enormous frame, the silver-scaled demon howled as the sword cut deep into its shoulder.

It was definitely a forceful strategy, but I have a fondness for people who are that bold.

“Go, Satou!”

“Right!”

At Sir Gouen’s prompting, I drove my Spellblade-covered sword into the now-defenseless demon’s torso.

Feeling some “Magic Power Armor”-like resistance, I discreetly used the Practical Magic spell Mana Drain with my free hand, stealing the force that was strengthening his defenses.

“Liza!”

“Yes, sir!”

I called out to Liza, who had defeated the lesser demon and was watching our fight.

She used “Blink” to close in and pierced her Magic Spear through the silver

demon's heart from behind.

"This is iiiiiiit!"

As the demon was skewered in place by my sword and Liza's spear, Sir Gouen attacked one more time and sliced it clean in two.

The silver demon's body turned into black dust and disappeared, leaving one long horn to fall to the ground with a shrill crack.

"EEEEEEK!"

One of the remaining Wings of Freedom members was trying to abduct Duke Vistall's youngest daughter.

"Lady Somienna!"

Shouting out her name, Sir Gouen gave chase with "Blink" and beheaded the member in one fell swoop.

The young girl fainted from the sudden, frightful scene, but Sir Gouen was able to gently catch her.

Wait, that's...

There was something concerning in the corpse's hand.

"Master."

"Yeah. It's a long horn."

It was an evil tool that could turn a human into a demon—an intermediate one, no less.

I had little doubt that the silver-scaled demon we had just fought was a former human who'd been transformed by a long horn like this, too.

Sir Gouen picked it up before I had a chance and put it away in his Item Box, along with the used long horn the silver demon had dropped.

Since he was a member of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, the guardians of the Shiga Kingdom, I could probably trust him to take care of things from there.



"Sir Gouen, thank you and your followers so much for helping us!"

One of the young guards came running up to us.

“Moron! These two aren’t with me. They’re a couple of amazing fighters who just happened to be passing by and helped out.”

“R-really?! Please forgive me, I had no idea! I’m terribly sorry, but could I ask your name?”

I thought about passing the incident off by saying, “I’m no one worth introducing” or something like that, but since I’d already introduced myself to Sir Gouen, I gave my name to the guard as well.

The young guard told Sir Gouen about Liza’s deeds. Apparently, while I was backing up Sir Gouen, Liza had defeated five lesser demons on her own.

“A swordsman who can hold his own against an intermediate demon, and a spear user who can wipe out five lesser demons on her own... The Shiga Eight candidates this time around really are something.”

Sir Gouen smacked Liza and me on the back, praising our efforts.

“Master...”

“Are you all right, sir?”

Noticing that the battle was over, Tama and Pochi ran over.

The rest of my group was behind them, too. They’d been helping ordinary citizens escape while they kept an eye out for reinforcements.

“Sorry, Mia, do you mind healing the wounded?”

“Mm.”

Mia nodded and trotted over to the guards.

Lulu followed her, explaining in the quiet elf girl’s stead that they were here to heal the injured and directing them all to stand in one place.

“Nurse mooode...” “Sir!” Tama and Pochi, too, put on medical armbands and ran over to help.

“Are those your attendants, Satou?”

“They’re more like my comrades, but yes.”

Sir Gouen seemed to like children; he watched with the fondness of an old man as they went to work, then ruffled Tama and Pochi on the head when they came back.

“Great work, little ones.”

“Ni-hee-hee...”

“Heh-heh, sir.”

Tama and Pochi looked pleased.

He tried to pat Mia’s head, too, but she dodged his hand nimbly and hid behind me.

“You like kids, huh?” Arisa asked.

“Sure do! I’ve got daughters around their age back home.” Sir Gouen pulled something about the size of a small notebook from his pocket and opened it. “Cute, right?”

Sir Gouen showed us a miniature portrait of his family and told us at great length how wonderful his wife was and how adorable his children were.

Talking to such a doting parent reminded me of an old friend of mine who always showed me tons of videos of his kids when I visited him.

“You can’t bring them to the royal capital?”

“Yeah, my wife doesn’t really wanna leave her hometown...”

It sounded like a personal situation, so I signaled to Arisa with my eyes to change the subject. Fortunately, a guard came over at just the right time.

“Sir Gouen, we’ve finished healing the wounded and bringing in more guards.”

“All right! Great!” Sir Gouen turned back to us. “Sorry, I’ll have to tell you about my precious daughters another time.”

“Yes, I look forward to it.”

“I’ll be at the Holy Knights’ headquarters more often than not. Come by anytime. You’re more than welcome.”

Without waiting to hear my answer, Sir Gouen walked away with the guards who were escorting the carriage.



“A letter...?”

When we got back to Baron Muno’s mansion, one of the maids handed me a letter that had arrived for me.

I didn’t recognize the seal, but it was definitely addressed to me. I opened it carefully, since it was considered rude to break the seal if it was from a higher-ranking noble.

“Who’s it from?”

“Sir Juleburg of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen.”

The letter invited me and my group to the Shiga Eight Swordsmen’s home base in the Holy Knights’ headquarters.

“It says it’s an invitation, but...”

“Yeah, it’s more like a summons.”

Refusing didn’t seem to be an option.

Given the timing, it probably didn’t have anything to do with the brawny swordsman Sir Gouen, but that wasn’t much comfort.

I’ll have to come up with a plan tonight to avoid him bragging to me about his kids forever.

That night, after helping my group train rigorously in triple-burst “Spellblade Shots” until they were satisfied, I transformed into Kuro, found the hideout of the demon lord–worshipping Wings of Freedom cult, and raided it alone, tying up every last one of the members and tossing them into jail.

I made sure to get permission from the king and prime minister first, of course.

It took longer than I expected, so I wasn’t able to come up with any plans to get out of hearing about Sir Gouen’s daughters.

Since there were smaller hideouts all over the place, I didn’t get back home

until dawn.

“Master, you really need to stop overworking yourself.”

I apologized to Arisa, who was kindly worried about me, and slept like a log for just an hour.

Duel! The Shiga Eight Swordsmen

“Satou here. The word duel makes me picture two esteemed nobles battling with rapiers. Maybe it’s because I think of battles with Japanese katana as ‘swordfights’ instead.”

“Yaaawn...”

“Siiir...”

Tama and Pochi pretended to yawn.

I patted their heads, stifling a real yawn of my own.

“Tired?”

“Just a little.”

Arisa shot me a worried look.

“Pillow.”

Mia patted her lap encouragingly, but that wouldn’t really be practical in a cramped carriage; I thanked her and politely refused.

Like the day before, we were riding three borrowed horse-drawn carriages, this time to go to the Holy Knights’ headquarters.

At first, Liza and I were going to go alone, but Arisa said that she wanted to see us “being cool,” which ended in everyone else demanding to come along, too.

“Satou.”

Mia pointed up ahead.

“There are knights in white armor standing guard. That must be the Holy Knights’ headquarters, then.”

“Mm, elegant.”

“Gorgeooous...”

“Very great, sir.”

Just as the kids observed, the building made of white and bluish marble gave off a very imposing air.

“Looks like the kind of building you’d see in a fantasy MMO.”

I couldn’t help snickering at Arisa’s remark. *It really does look like a starting area in a game or something.*

“Halt!”

As our carriage drew close to the gate, the knights standing guard on either side of the entrance crossed their spears to stop us.

“I know not who you are, good sirrah, but this is the headquarters of the Order of Holy Knights. None who do not have business here may enter.”

The knight addressed us in a civil but firm manner.

Since I had so many women and children with me, he probably thought I was some stupid noble’s son.

I got down from the carriage alone and showed the Holy Knight my letter from Sir Juleburg, the leader of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen.

“What’s this?”

The knight took the letter doubtfully, but his eyes widened when he saw Sir Juleburg’s seal still intact on the envelope.

“I—I’m terribly sorry! I had no idea you were a guest of His Excellency Sir Juleburg!”

The knight quickly straightened up and apologized, then directed his comrades to let us through. He even generously offered to guide us to Sir Juleburg. I gratefully accepted, because otherwise our large party probably would’ve been stopped again along the way.

“Clang clang clang...?”

“Cling clang, sir.”

“Master, I hear the sounds of battle, I report.”

As the sound of clashing swords reached us, Tama and Pochi latched on to my arm to inform me about it, followed shortly by Huit. The former Number 8 seemed to be particularly touchy-feely and was always clinging to her sisters, too.

Seeing this, Mia grabbed my other hand.

“There.”

“Looks like they’re in the middle of training.”

Mia and Arisa had spotted the Holy Knights training in an arena.

According to my map information, the group consisted of Sir Juleburg and several Shiga Eight Swordsmen, along with members of the Holy Knights.

Sir Juleburg, who had sent me the letter, seemed to be observing the knights’ training from the sidelines.

“Captain Juleburg! Sir Pendragon has arrived!”

Once we reached the arena, the Holy Knight who’d guided us there shouted to Sir Juleburg so loudly that my ears hurt.

“So you’ve come, Sir Pendragon...” Sir Juleburg suddenly trailed off as he turned toward us. “...What is the meaning of this?”

He seemed rather annoyed.

The beastfolk girls and Nana were wearing armor, but everyone else, including me, was in their normal clothes. Maybe that was what bothered him?

“The letter you sent mentioned that I should bring company along, so I took you up on the kind invitation so that they could observe and learn.”

Sir Juleburg’s expression turned sour, evidently remembering his own letter.

I’m guessing he really only wanted me to bring Liza.

“Perhaps I’ve brought a few too many people?”

“...It’s fine.”

He didn’t seem to want to go back on his word.

“Liza of the Black Spear, I challenge you to a duel! It’s payback for our fight in Labyrinth City! Just wait till you see how strong I am after the captain trained me himself!”

As Sir Juleburg sank into silence, a Holy Knight with a white spear over his shoulder called out to Liza.

I didn’t remember his face, but the distinctive weapon looked familiar. He was one of the people who’d challenged Liza to a fight in Labyrinth City and lost.

“Kerun, eh...very well, go ahead.”

“Master, if I may?”

Once Sir Juleburg gave permission for the duel, Liza turned to me to get permission as well.

Sir Kerun may have gotten stronger, but I was sure Liza had gotten even more so.

I nodded at Liza to let her test her own strength.

Liza and I headed into the arena, leaving the rest of the group in the audience seats.

Sir Juleburg announced the duel between Kerun and Liza, and sent the training Holy Knights out of the arena.

“Wait, she’s just a kid. So the ‘Liza of the Black Spear’ Kerun’s always talking about is just some skinny little girl?” A bearded knight with a yellow spear scoffed loudly, picking a fight.

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on Arisa muttering, “Wow, he’s just begging to lose after a line like that.” I had to agree with her.

“Liza, before you fight Sir Kerun, why don’t you take on this confident gentleman?” I suggested, after asking permission from Sir Juleburg.

The two of them moved to the center of the arena, and the Holy Knight who would be refereeing told Liza the rules of the battle: It would continue until someone was knocked out, said “I give up,” or until the referee stopped it.

Trying to injure or kill one’s opponent out of ill will was against the rules.

While they were going over this, some “Light Magic” users and high-level priests from various temples put defensive magic on both combatants.

Ultimately, it was only meant to prevent them from seriously hurting each other; they didn’t give them any strengthening or attack-enhancing Support Magic.

“Good luuuck...?”

“You can do it, Liza, sir!”

Tama, Pochi, and the rest of the group cheered her on from the spectators’ seats.

“Tch, what is this, some game for kids?”

The knight with the yellow spear rudely spat on the ground.

“Jagou! Don’t lose to some scaly girl!”

“Show that lizard her place!”

Some friends of the knight with the yellow spear jeered from the group of Holy Knights.

“You know I will! I’ll prove that I’m suited to be in the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, not some idiot like Kerun!” the knight yelled back.

“Combatants, enter the ring.”

Both fighters followed the ref’s instructions.

The knight with the yellow spear was glaring at Liza like she’d killed his mother, but it didn’t seem to affect her any more than a light wind.

“Begin!”

On the referee’s signal, the knight used “Blink” to charge at Liza and jab at her three times in rapid succession.

Liza avoided the jabs easily, then raised her own spear and knocked the weapon from the knight’s hand.

“Wha—”

The knight stared blankly at his now-empty hands.

A short distance away, the spear hit the ground with a loud clatter.

“The match isn’t over yet. Pick up your weapon.”

“D-don’t mess with me! You’ll regret this!”

The knight snarled a classic small-time villain line as he picked up his spear, then filled it with magic power to activate “Spellblade.”

I hate to say it, but it took a pretty long time to activate.

“Eat this! Secret move—‘Helix Spear’!”

Liza instantly activated “Spellblade” on her own Magic Cricket Spear and calmly parried the knight’s attack.

“I-impossible! You parried the unblockable ‘Helix Spear’?!”

The knight with the yellow spear jumped back as he exclaimed in shock.

“When did she invoke ‘Spellblade’?” “She was able to block it with such feeble ‘Spellblade’?” The other knights murmured in surprise as well.

They probably only thought Liza’s “Spellblade” was “feeble” because the yellow spear was giving off so much excessive red light.

“Unblockable? You have much to learn. Besides, unless someone is far weaker than you, it’s far too prideful to assume that such a showy attack will reach your opponent without you even attempting to catch them by surprise or knock them off balance first.”

Liza closed in on him with “Blink,” dodging and knocking away his attacks as she admonished the knight.

Meanwhile, the knight with the yellow spear probably wasn’t listening, since it was all he could do to keep dodging her attacks.

“Wow, not bad. Your spear user’s pretty strong, Sir Pendragon.”

I caught a scent of perfume and felt something soft against my neck, shortly followed by the sensation of metal armor.

Lady Helmina, the gun user of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, had snuck up behind me and put me in a headlock.

I heard a cry of “guilty” from Arisa and Mia in the spectators’ seats, but I pretended not to notice.

“Yes, she’s an extremely talented comrade.”

I slipped out of Helmina’s headlock without taking my eyes off Liza’s fight.

“I forgot that you’re a skilled martial artist yourself,” she remarked.

“Oh, it’s just a hobby.”

Lady Helmina stood beside me to watch the battle.

“It’s certainly one-sided...but that’s exactly what that moron Jagou deserves.”

Sure enough, it seemed like the knight with the yellow spear was a bit of a problem member.

“So. I heard you chased down those airship attackers, hmm?”

“That’s a misunderstanding. I went to meet up with some friends who were traveling separately and just happened upon them by chance.”

I had forgotten that Lady Helmina and Sir Juleburg had been sent to rescue Duke Vistall’s youngest daughter, who was with some of the airship attackers.

“Just when we finally caught up with them, the attackers had already been captured and the duke’s wife recovered, and we were told that the all-important Miss Somienna was in the custody of guards, too. Talk about a wasted effort.”

It would’ve been rude to say “thanks for your hard work” or something like that, so I graciously allowed Lady Helmina to put her arm back around my neck and grind her fist into the side of my head.

“Ah...”

“Sir!”

There was a development in the battle, which Liza had dominated from start to finish.

The knight with the yellow spear had lost his balance while dodging an attack, slipped, and landed firmly on his rear end.

Liza was holding her Magic Cricket Spear to his neck.

“How shameful...,” Sir Juleburg murmured, just as the referee declared Liza’s victory.

“Not yet! I haven’t lost yet!”

As Liza turned her back on the man to come back toward me, the knight threw his spear at her with Spellblade on the tip.

What an idiot.

Even with her back turned, Liza would never let down her guard.

Liza dodged to the side with “Blink,” then spun the Magic Spear in her hands to knock the knight’s spear up into the air.

Turning around, she flicked the falling spear with her own.

It flew forward at top speed and stabbed into the ground right between the knight’s legs.

“Liza’s too nice,” I heard Arisa mutter with my “Keen Hearing” skill. “She should’ve landed a direct hit.”

Sir Juleburg began reprimanding the knight with the yellow spear at once, and his fellow Holy Knights dragged him to his feet and away from the arena.

“I apologize for my subordinate’s massive failure.”

Sir Juleburg bowed his head to Liza and me.

A few of the Holy Knights exclaimed indignantly about him bowing his head to a scalefolk person, but Sir Juleburg didn’t respond. I guess there were some Holy Knights from old noble families or the northern part of the kingdom who were prejudiced against demi-humans.

“All right, now it’s my turn.”

“Sorry, but I’ll be going first, Kerun.”

Sir Juleburg held out his own spear to stop Sir Kerun and walked over to Liza in his place.



“I am Zef Juleburg the Unstoppable, First Seat of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen. I seek a bout with you, Ms. Liza of the Black Spear!”

Sir Juleburg was now addressing Liza with the polite title “Ms.”

I guess he recognized her strength.

Liza looked over to me for permission, and I nodded, feeling proud.

The thought did occur to me that we might get caught up in something bothersome, depending on the results of the match, but I was more concerned with letting Liza show off the results of her training in the labyrinth.

If anyone tried to recruit her or use her as a pawn, I could deal with that with the help of my personal connections, or even go to the king or the prime minister as Nanashi the Hero, if it came to that.

“I would hear your answer!”

“I, Liza of the Black Spear, subordinate of Sir Pendragon, accept your challenge and agree to a duel, Sir Juleburg the Unstoppable.”

Wow, that was pretty cool.

She must have learned these formalities when she did all those duels in Labyrinth City.

The two stepped into the arena. Liza looked calm and natural as always.

A crowd of onlookers had gathered in the spectators’ seats.

In addition to Holy Knights and squires from the headquarters, there were employees of the building and even officers and nobles who happened to be in the area on business.

“I’ll go easy on you, but don’t let your guard down if you don’t want to die.”

“Of course. I always put my life on the line in battle. However, please do not worry; I would never cross the line in a battle against an elder. I will be sure to hold back.”

“Ho-ho, what a caring young woman, to show such respect for an old man like me.”

“Any kindness of mine is only inherited from my master.”

Once the priests and light mages finished their enchantments, Sir Juleburg and Liza started exchanging thinly veiled barbs.

Judging by the tingling sensation on my skin, they were probably both using their “Intimidation” skills, too.

“She’s a good one, that girl. She isn’t giving an inch against Sir Juleburg.”

Lady Helmina, who still had her arm around my neck, looked at Liza approvingly.

She later explained that trying to intimidate or provoke an opponent before a battle like this was standard practice.

“Activate the arena barrier.”

On Lady Helmina’s command, several Practical Magic defensive barriers formed around the battlefield.

They were produced by the kind of magic device that might be used in a fortress, and they made barriers on a par with those created by greater magic spells by using a huge amount of energy from a Magic Furnace.

They didn’t have the same amount of individual defense power as the Umbrella and Fortress spells I created, but the barriers were stronger than the shields Nana could produce with Foundation.

“This is quite a production.”

“Normally we only use these things for magic battles, but we’ll need them if Sir Juleburg goes all out.”

I couldn’t imagine why a defensive barrier would be necessary for close combat, aside from Liza’s “Spellblade Shots,” but I just nodded rather than question it further.



*

“Let’s begin.”

“Very well.”

As soon as the ref gave the signal, the battle began with the first move going to Sir Juleburg.

Despite both sides claiming they would go easy on the other, they were both using “Spellblade.”

“I was thinking this earlier, too, but that girl’s really fast at using ‘Spellblade,’” Lady Helmina remarked next to me. “It doesn’t look very strong, but it’s more stable than even Sir Juleburg’s ‘Spellblade.’”

“That’s our captain. It’s no wonder he’s the top of the Shiga Eight. His ‘Spellblade’ puts that idiot Jagou’s to shame.”

“Look at that scale girl’s wimpy ‘Spellblade.’ She’s fast, I’ll give her that, but I bet it’ll fall apart with one blow.”

“How strange. I could’ve sworn Ms. Liza’s ‘Spellblade’ was stronger...”

I heard a few of the Holy Knights and Sir Kerun chatting.

Since this was a duel, Liza was using only the bare minimum coating to make sure her Magic Cricket Spear didn’t get damaged, but nobody seemed to realize that.

I would think it’d be inefficient to have it blazing at full power all the time anyway. Were most people not capable of managing the power level of their “Spellblade”?

“Here they go.”

Just as Lady Helmina spoke, Sir Juleburg and Liza’s figures both blurred.

They closed in on each other at incredible speed, their spears clashing faster than the eye could follow.

“Six attaaacks...?”

“Liza’s amazing, but Mr. Old Guy is, too, sir.”

“Wait, what?! I only saw one attack just now, though!”

“It looked like two attacks to me.”

“Arisa, Lulu, you can follow most of their movements if you look at the dust at their feet, I advise.”

I heard my group talking behind me.

“Wow, she really is impressive. She managed to block Sir Juleburg’s spear and everything. And what’s more...”

Lady Helmina watched the battle closely.

Liza and Sir Juleburg were moving nonstop, exchanging blows at dazzling speed.

“Sir Juleburg seems tenser than when he spars with Gouen or Heim...”

To Lady Helmina’s surprise, Liza seemed to be at an advantage.

Sir Juleburg’s level was 56, four levels higher than Liza’s.

Yet Liza was holding her own against him with her skillful footwork and spear strikes.

“Ohh, greeeat...?”

“Amazing, sir! He’s keeping up with Liza, sir! Pochi wants to fight him, too, sir!”

“I agree with Pochi, I declare. I would like to try to block those attacks, I report.”

My vanguard seemed excited about the fight, too, from the spectators’ seats.

“Damn, the captain’s crazy, but that demi-human’s crazy, too.”

“Did you see that spear move?”

“Yeah, damn. I’ve never seen anyone block that move of the captain’s with a spear before.”

The audience was roaring at the impressive exchange of attacks between two spear users from very different schools. It was certainly a very high-speed battle.

I'd seen Liza square off with the elf teachers before, but this one was even more intense to watch, since it felt like they were both out for blood.

I kept a close eye on their every move, ready to stop them at a moment's notice.

Oh?

The two of them jumped back.

"I had no idea... I must apologize for underestimating you, Ms. Liza of the Black Spear."

"You are very strong yourself. It has been a long time since I sparred with any human this strong besides my master."

Both combatants caught their breath as they exchanged words.

"I'd better get serious from now on."

Juleburg grinned savagely and adjusted his grip on his spear.

The red light of magic power glowed from the gaps in his Holy Knight's armor, and my AR display told me that he had used "Body Strengthening."

"Then I shall get serious as well."

Liza, too, activated her "Body Strengthening" and related skills.

Liza's armor had a recognition-inhibiting device, so there was no magic light from within her armor from the level of strengthening she used.

"The captain's using 'Body Strengthening'!"

"Has he ever used that outside of a duel with the other Shiga Eight?"

"Liza of the Black Spear really is amazing, to get the captain to fight so seriously!"

I overheard the Holy Knights talking. Sir Kerun seemed to have nothing but admiration for Liza, despite losing to her previously.

"Incredible... It's moving so fast that even I can't quite keep up," said Lady Helmina.

Now that Liza and Sir Juleburg were using "Body Strengthening" and "Blink"

nonstop, their battle was hard to follow, even for someone who was used to following high-speed movements.

“Sir Juleburg’s reaction was delayed? What did that girl do, I wonder?” Lady Helmina murmured as she watched.

It was hard to tell from here, but to Sir Juleburg it must have looked like Liza’s spear had vanished.

It was an attack with a skill called “Gap Attack,” which was virtually impossible to avoid for someone who had never seen it before. The experienced Sir Juleburg had managed to dodge it, though.

Liza’s rapid barrage of attacks, including her assaults with “Gap Attack,” pummeled into Sir Juleburg’s body.

Or so it seemed—until his body suddenly shifted to the side.

“Must be ‘Doppelgänger’—no, ‘Gap Defense.’”

“Wow, I’m impressed you could tell.”

The “Gap Defense” skill Sir Juleburg used was a similar feinting technique to “Gap Attack,” which made it difficult to land attacks in close quarters.

Both of these were skills that we learned from Hayato the Hero.

No one but he and Tama could use the “Gap Defense” skill, or so I thought.

The head of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen really was impressive.

“She’s holding her own against Sir Juleburg...”

“Hey, Heim. How would you fight against her?”

“If it was a fight I could get away from, then I would. If not, I would shoot for a draw.”

“Yeah, it’d be impossible to survive fighting her without a scratch.”

With my “Keen Hearing” skill, I heard some members of the Shiga Eight chatting nearby.

One was Sir Gouen, who I’d fought alongside against the demon in the royal capital the day before.

“Ah, that was close!” Lady Helmina exclaimed.

Liza’s spear had grazed Sir Juleburg’s helmet, sending his visor flying.

I wasn’t sure whether it was a difference in their base skills or the percent of their “Body Strengthening,” but where they had previously been evenly matched, now Liza had the clear advantage.

Sir Juleburg was having an increasingly hard time defending against Liza’s attacks, and faint cracks were beginning to form in his Holy Knight’s armor.

But I seriously doubted someone as experienced as Sir Juleburg would go down that easily.

“■■■ **Flash Gravel Senreki!**”

In the midst of an attack, there was a flash from the tip of Sir Juleburg’s spear, and countless pebbles of light flew out in concentric circles.

They set up small bursts wherever they hit the ground.

He seemed to have used a feinting spell with a short chant.

“‘Helix Spear Attack’!”

Using the magic attack as a distraction, Sir Juleburg shifted his stance and used a quick attack.

He was aiming not for any vitals, but for Liza’s shoulder.

“‘Blink,’ ‘Helix Spear Attack’!”

Liza had predicted that he would attack during the flash of light, and she used “Blink” to dodge while countering with the same special attack.

Her attack, too, was aimed at the arm holding the spear, not at any vital points.

“Nngh... Not a chance!”

Sir Juleburg forcibly changed the trajectory of his spear.

The two Spellblade-coated spearheads crashed into each other, sending up red sparks between them.

It looked like the clash would go on until one of the spears broke, but it ended

within seconds, and both of them jumped away.

Liza still looked energetic, but the older Sir Juleburg was clearly getting exhausted.

His stamina gauge in my AR display made it clear that he wouldn't be able to fight for much longer.

"You're strong...Black Spear."

"You as well, Unstoppable."

Each of them acknowledged the other's strength.

"You are strong indeed. Now, there are some moves in this world that are known as 'novice killers.'"

That probably referred to moves like the "Gap Attack" that Liza used earlier.

"But among those, there are fewer still that cannot be dodged, even if one knows they are coming."

Sir Juleburg's spear glowed a brighter red.

He seemed to be preparing to use some particularly big move.

"As a show of respect for your talents at such a young age, I shall share this move with you. It is a legendary technique hidden even deeper within the secrets of 'Spellblade.'"

Sir Juleburg readied his spear at the hip and started concentrating magic at the spearhead.

"That move...," Lady Helmina murmured.

Liza held her own spear at the ready, watching his moves carefully in an effort to steal the technique.

I used my "Magic Power Vision" skill to keep a close eye on the flow of magic.

Was this something different from "Spellblade Shot"?

No, judging by the way the magic was gathering, it might very well be "Spellblade Shot."

"Ooh, the captain's got a ton of magic in his spear now!"

“He’s gonna use that move that only the strongest of the strong can handle!”

The Holy Knights all started shouting, too, when they saw the Spellblade swelling up at the end of the spear.

It didn’t seem concentrated enough for a “Spellblade Shot,” though.

Maybe it was going to be more of a cone-shaped attack instead of an attack from round bullets?

For someone with strong magical defenses, that didn’t seem like much more than a diversion.

Once he was finished, Sir Juleburg let out a roar and unleashed the magic power.

“Wait, don’t just stand there—”

“Ms. Liza!”

Arisa and Lulu cried out in the stands, concerned for Liza’s safety.

A cannonball of magic power with a swath as wide as a human was tall zoomed toward Liza, speeding up along the way.

As the speed increased, Sir Juleburg used “Blink” to charge at Liza as well.

His attack seemed to be a one-two combo of the “Spellblade Shot” and his own strike.

Once Sir Juleburg’s magic cannonball came close to Liza, her hand finally moved.

She formed a small, red “Spellblade Shot” in the blink of an eye and quickly fired it.

The two masses of magic collided right in front of Liza, and a red flash of light filled the arena.

The barrier around the inside of the arena reflected the red light, making it hard to see Liza and Sir Juleburg inside.

Still, I could faintly see that Liza’s “Spellblade Shot” had broken through Sir Juleburg’s, and crashed into him with the resulting shock waves.

The defensive magic on Sir Juleburg couldn't handle the burden and dissipated.

Then I saw Liza's wrist flick slightly.

Uh, Liza?

A second "Spellblade Shot" flew toward Sir Juleburg.

It had been reduced to the bare minimum size and strength, but Sir Juleburg wouldn't be able to dodge it in his current stance.

Still, he hadn't remained at the top of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen for so many years for no good reason. With a yell, he produced a second "Spellblade Shot" from his other hand.

Of course, it came at the price of his fist, which was completely broken in the process.

But the old warrior was too determined to let that slow him down.

He used his remaining good arm to charge his spear with magic for one last attack.

But then, Liza's third and final "Spellblade Shot" struck the wrist of his hand that was holding the spear.

She must have used the triple burst attack that she only just learned the day before.

Liza closed in with "Blink" and spun around, using her tail to swipe Sir Juleburg's legs out from under him before he could recover. The captain hit the ground, and Liza pointed her spear at his throat, stopping him from moving any further.

The red light finally faded from the arena's barrier, revealing the results to the audience.

"S-Sir Juleburg?"

"He used 'Spellblade Shot'! How'd he end up going down?"

I heard cries of confusion from the group of knights.

But that only lasted until the referee declared Liza's victory.

“The winner is Liza of the Black Spear!”

When those words echoed across the arena, cheers rang out loud enough to shake the royal capital.

I couldn't hear who was saying what, but it was clear that they were congratulating Liza and celebrating her.

Liza took a few steps away from Sir Juleburg before raising her spear in my direction. It was very like her not to let down her guard, even after being declared the victor.

I shouted out my own cheers with all my might, waving back at her.

We could worry about what this might lead to later. For now, I just wanted to celebrate her victory.



“Remove the arena barriers! Priests, heal Sir Juleburg's wounds!”

The priests and arena workers scrambled around on Lady Helmina's orders.

As soon as the barrier walls disappeared, the priests and light mages ran to Sir Juleburg's side and began to use Healing Magic on him.

Given the remarkable effectiveness of advanced Holy Magic, his broken hand was healing in no time.

“That was amazing...”

Hearing Arisa's voice, I turned to see my group running from the spectators' seats.

“Ms. Liza...”

Once his wounds were healed, Sir Juleburg called out to Liza. He seemed to want to talk to her, so I grabbed Tama and Pochi to stop them from running over to her.

“Ms. Liza, your strength is truly impressive.”

“Thank you for the kind words.”

Liza responded with a calm expression, but her tail was whipping back and

forth, revealing her true feelings.

“...The Shiga Eight are both the sword and shield that protect the kingdom,” Sir Juleburg said to Liza suddenly. “Thus, I believe that as long as one possesses true strength, a noble heart, and devotion to their kingdom, anyone ought to be able to join, regardless of race or birthplace.”

He seemed to be inviting Liza to join the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, although it didn't look like she had quite picked up on that.

“There are currently two vacant positions among the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, and some nobles are using them as tools for their foolish power struggles. But I managed to wrest one of the seats away from them.”

I wished he wouldn't have glared at me when he talked about the “power struggles” part.

One of the seats probably belonged to the third prince, Sharorik, who we'd met in the old capital, but who did the other seat belong to?

Come to think of it, I did hear talk about Sir Torel's successor in the airship on the way to the royal capital. The other empty seat, then, must belong to the wyvern knight Torel, who Zena met when she ran into a lesser dragon in Zetts County.

“I wish to offer that seat to you... You will accept, will you not?”

His eyes glittered as he looked at Liza.

Next to me, the rest of our group watched Liza anxiously, except for Nana, who just took her shield out of her Fairy Pack and put it on her arm.

“I'm afraid I must decline.”

Liza shook her head, sounding unenthusiastic.

Some of my group, like Arisa and Pochi, sighed in relief. That was all well and good, but Arisa, using the moment to shove her face into my leg, was a bit much. And I wished Mia wouldn't imitate her.

“But why? You may be Sir Pendragon's slave now, but if you become a member of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, you can be freed by authority of the king and even become an honorary count! Why would you reject such an honor

and rank that a demi-human could normally never reach?”

Sir Juleburg wore an expression of disbelief, but Liza stopped him.

“It’s true it is an honor I would never have dared dream of.”

“Then why—”

“However, my loyalty lies not with this kingdom but with my master. I am not qualified to be a part of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, who serve the Shiga Kingdom first and foremost.”

That seemed like a borderline dangerous proclamation.

What if they took that to mean that we’re a private army with no loyalty to Shiga Kingdom?

“That’s right!” Arisa jumped in hastily. “We’re the Pendragon Seven Braves! We’ll become the new protectors of the world, who rival even the Shiga Eight Swordsmen! Right, master?”

Where’d this “Pendragon Seven Braves” come from? Was it a nod to the Sanada Ten Braves, the famous ninja group from the Warring States period?

She was probably just saying this to smooth over what Liza said, but her smug expression made it distressingly possible that she was completely serious.

“Oh-ho! You’re gonna rival the Shiga Eight, huh?”

“But she defeated Sir Juleburg the Unstoppable. They might be able to do just that.”

“Yeah, it’s the birth of a new protector of the Shiga Kingdom, with light attacks from her spear!”

“Black Spear... No, she defeats evil with the light of her spear. Hellsbane Lightspear Liza!”

“Glory to the Shiga Kingdom and the Pendragon Seven Braves!”

The name Arisa had blurted out was getting passed around by the peanut gallery like an official proclamation.

Maybe it was just excitement from the big match, but the energy in the crowd was strange. They were so enthusiastic that I almost wondered if there were

confederates in the audience.

Was it that big of a deal that Liza had defeated Sir Juleburg?

Some of the warriors and visitors in the spectators' seats had apparently seen Liza use "Spellblade Shot" and decided to give her a new nickname.

I didn't think Arisa's declaration was enough to put a stop to further discussion of Liza's joining the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, but it seemed to have at least helped delay the matter. I would have to talk to someone like Viscount Nina for advice on how to deal with it from here.

Incidentally, it wasn't until much later that I learned that the "Pendragon Seven Braves" was actually a title from Pochi's novel in progress.



"It's my turn next."

"Wait, Kerun. Let me have a go, too."

"No, it is I who ought to do battle with Hellsbane Lightspear Liza!"

Kerun, the knight with the white spear who'd been waiting his turn the longest, was arguing with the other knights who now wanted their turn sparring with Liza.

"Master, I wish to battle the elderly warrior who Liza fought, I request."

Nana pressed toward me with her shield already equipped.

"Tama will fight, tooo...?"

"Pochi wants to fight the strong grandpa, too, sir."

Tama and Pochi hopped up and down with their hands in the air.

Then a much larger hand landed on each of their heads.

"Sorry, no kids."

It was Sir Gouen, patting their heads.

"Whyyy...?"

"Pochi can fight, too, sir! I train with Liza allll the time, sir!"

“Hmm, this is a real pickle...”

The heroic Sir Gouen looked perplexed at the young duo.

“Allow me to train with you, then.”

This offer came from a warrior with a stern, fatherly face.

Instead of wearing Holy Knight armor, he was clad in a worn-down Holy Knight’s uniform with only a breastplate and shoulder plates. His boots and gloves were made from monster hides.

“Heim!” Sir Gouen exclaimed the man’s name.

Heim was another member of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, with the nickname “The Weedy.” At level 53, he was one level above the beastfolk girls.

“You sure?”

“I don’t mind. Before I joined the Eight, I often trained noble children in the countryside.”

“Ho-ho, really? That’s news to me.”

“It matters not.” Ending his conversation with Sir Gouen, Heim approached Tama and Pochi. “What say you?”

Tama and Pochi turned toward me, their hopeful eyes asking for permission. I nodded.

“I’ll do it~”

“Pochi, too, sir!”

“All right, then let’s use a corner of the arena.”

Heim walked away with Tama and Pochi in tow.

“I’m a little worried... I’ll keep an eye on them to make sure Heim doesn’t overdo it.”

Lady Helmina followed after the three. A lot of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen seemed to be fond of kids.

If anything, though, I was more worried about Tama and Pochi going overboard.

“Master, permission to do battle with the elderly warrior? I request.”

Now that Tama and Pochi were done stealing the spotlight, Nana resumed her request.

“Sir Juleburg needs rest. But I, Sir Gouen the Strongsword, Fifth of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, will gladly take you on.”

“You are a worthy opponent, I declare. Permission to do battle, master?”

“W-wait a minute, Number 7!”

“Adin, my name is Nana, I declare.”

“This opponent is too dangerous. He is most certainly stronger than us.”

Nana’s eldest sister, Number 1—Adin—seemed worried about Nana.

“Adin, Nana will be fine.”

“But, master...”

Adin tried to continue protesting, but I hushed her and gave Nana permission.

“All right, I’ll give you the first move. Come at me anytime.”

“Understood, I report.”

Some distance from where Liza was fighting, Nana and Sir Gouen’s battle began.

Nana pretended to use a chant as she used the Foundation techniques “Body Strengthening” and “Flexible Shield.”

“Preparations complete. End of phase, I announce.”

“End of phase? I take it that means you’re counting that as your first move?”

“Correct, I respond.”

“Then here I come!”

Raising his two-handed sword above his head, Sir Gouen charged toward Nana, activating “Blink” along the way. He used that momentum to swing his enormous sword down toward Nana.

The sword crashed into Nana’s raised shield, and the ground beneath her feet

cracked like something out of a manga fight scene. Clouds of dust rose from the cracks and hid the fight from view.

Even at level 51, Sir Gouen shouldn't normally have such powerful attacks.

Judging by his skill setup, he had probably used "Body Strengthening" and some kind of "Muscle Enhancement" or "Strength" skill.

""""Nana!""""

Nana's sisters cried out in concern.

"Master, is Nana all right? I inquire."

"Don't worry, she's fine," I reassured the teary-eyed Huit.

A red light flashed in the cloud of dust, and Sir Gouen jumped out, followed closely by Nana.

The flash must have been one of Nana's attacks.

"You're not half bad— Hah!"

Sir Gouen slashed his sword diagonally toward Nana.

One of the transparent Shields protecting her broke under Sir Gouen's attack.

"Whoa!"

Nana countered with a "Shield Bash," sending Sir Gouen flying as he finished his attack.

Sir Gouen soared through the air like a baseball that's been hit with a metal bat.

""""Amazing!""""

Nana's sisters exclaimed in awe at her impressive feat.

"Master!" Huit grabbed my arm and pointed toward Sir Gouen.

He had turned in midair and was coming back.

My guess was that it was some kind of "Double Jump" skill like Liza had, not my "Skyrunning" or Pochi's "Skywalking" skill.

As he returned, Sir Gouen launched a fierce attack on Nana that was worthy

of his nickname “Strongsword.”

But having guarded our party from so many monsters, Nana was able to easily and precisely deflect his attack.

“““Master, what is going on here?”””

“““Master, what is going on here? I inquire.”””

As they watched Nana block and parry all of Sir Gouen’s attacks, Nana’s sisters turned to me in surprise.

“She’s been training in the Celivera Labyrinth.”

The moment they heard my response, the homunculi sisters started insisting that they wanted to train and get stronger in the labyrinth, too.

“No, Tria does not really need to get stronger...”

Number 3, who was more interested in cooking, deferred at first, but changed her tune to “Tria wishes to go to the labyrinth, too” when Arisa whispered to her that “You can find lots of tasty ingredients in the labyrinth.”

“Well, how about after we’ve spent some more time relaxing in the royal capital, then?” I proposed, but this didn’t seem to tempt anyone but Huit, and I reluctantly agreed to talk about it more when we got back to the mansion.

“Master, it looks like Nana’s match is over.”

“Mm, a draw.”

Sir Gouen seemed to have ended the battle himself by saying, “I give up.”

“I can still continue the battle, I declare.”

“Nah, I give up,” Sir Gouen repeated calmly.

“My attacks didn’t work on you. Not just my sword, but even using other moves, trying to catch you by surprise, attacking from a distance—you blocked all of it. You’re a shield user on a par with the Holy Shield Sir Reilus himself.”

“No, she’s better.”

A dry voice cut into their conversation.

This person’s face looked familiar. It was the Holy Shield user of the Shiga

Eight Swordsmen himself, Sir Reilus, who'd been chaperoning for the former Second Seat of the Shiga Eight, Prince Sharorik, in the old capital.

"It's Sir Reilus."

"He's here? I thought he was still confining you at home."

"He didn't come to quit the Shiga Eight, did he?"

"No way! How would we fight powerful monsters without Sir Reilus?!"

The Holy Knights all started chattering among themselves. They seemed to be pretty attached to him.

"Sir Juleburg sent for me. I imagine he wanted me to see the demi-human girl and the young woman you just fought."

"So he's saying that if you keep slacking off, the next generation will surpass you, huh?"

"Typical Sir Juleburg."

Sir Gouen and Sir Reilus began talking comfortably, so I stepped away to go praise Nana, who was with her sisters.

"Master, I only won by default, I report." Nana seemed disappointed.

"You blocked all of his attacks," I reassured her. "That was definitely a victory."

She had perfectly defended against the attacks of a Shiga Eight Swordsmen member who was a higher level than she was, all without using any hidden equipment or the Fortress function that was a major part of her defense strategy. It was definitely a result to be proud of, in my opinion.

"It's true. I was the shield user of us sisters, but it seems you have surpassed me, Nana."

"Adin..."

Come to think of it, when we did battle in the Cradle, Adin (Number 1 back then) did use a shield.

The other sisters all complimented Nana, too.

“What’s the big idea? The captain and old Gouen both lost to little girls?”

“Ah, ‘the Grass Cutter’...”

A muscular woman around thirty years old appeared from the midst of the Holy Knights, who were watching us from some distance away.

She was wearing the kind of revealing outfit you might see in a game, but I was too distracted by her six-pack abs and wild-looking facial features to find it particularly sexy. She had a massive Grim Reaper–like scythe over her shoulders, presumably her main weapon.

Her eyes glinted as they fixed firmly on me.

“A black-haired kid—are you Pendragon, one of our candidates? You’re just some pasty little boy. The girl who was just fighting old Gouen looked way stronger than you.”

Her scythe flashed through the air.

It would have been easy to dodge the attack, but I parried it with my Fairy Sword instead.

Belatedly, I realized that the scythe was still sheathed. I had stopped it because I thought dodging it might risk hurting Nana’s sisters nearby, but maybe it would’ve been fine to just avoid it.

“Huh. Guess you’ve got some guts after all. I’m Ryuona, ‘the Grass Cutter,’ the last seat of the Shiga Eight.” She put away her scythe and yanked me over to her. “I’ll show you our real strength, not some useless old fogey.”

“Who’re you calling an old fogey?”

With a loud whoosh, Sir Gouen’s two-handed sword came swooping toward Lady Ryuona. She dodged the sword as nimbly as a leopardess, smirking coolly at Sir Gouen.

This meant that we had now met all the current Shiga Eight Swordsmen:

The First Seat: Sir Zef Juleburg “the Unstoppable,” a level-56 spear user.

The Third Seat: Sir Reilus Kelten “the Holy Shield,” a level-54 shield user.

The Fifth Seat: Lady Helmina Kirik “the Gun Saint,” a level-49 gun user.

The Sixth Seat: Sir Gouen Roitall “the Strongsword,” a level-51 double-handed sword user.

The Seventh Seat: Sir Heim Karaz “the Weedy,” a level-53 hand-and-a-half sword user.

The Eighth Seat: Ryuona Eseb “the Grass Cutter,” a level-48 scythe user.

So many of them had shown up at once that I was getting overwhelmed.

Still, given their nicknames, like “the Weedy” and “the Grass Cutter,” I was sorely tempted to ask if there weren’t any better alternatives.

“Lady Ryuona! There is no need for you to waste your time on such a child! Allow me to show him his place instead.”

The sudden interloper was none other than the Holy Knight with the yellow spear who had picked a fight with Liza and lost pathetically.

He’d been scolded by Sir Juleburg and taken away from the arena not long ago, yet somehow he’d doggedly come back.

“Jagou, eh...,” Lady Ryuona muttered and looked at me. “He’s an arrogant ass, but he is one of the top five strongest of the Holy Knights. Naturally, if you want to join the Shiga Eight, you’ll need to be strong enough to wipe the floor with someone like him.”

No, I really don’t want to join the Shiga Eight, though.

It would be rude to say that out loud, so I kept the rebuttal to myself.

“I may have fallen to that girl’s horrible Magic Spear, but there won’t be another miracle this time!”

The knight pointed his yellow spear at me.

He seemed to be implying that he’d lost because of a difference in their weapons.

“You’ll do it, right?” Lady Ryuona asked.

“Of course he will! Master wouldn’t lose to a useless hack like this guy!”

“Mm. Insta-kill.”

Arisa and Mia responded for me.

“Well? You heard your little friends here.”

“All right. Could I borrow a practice sword so he can’t try to blame it on our weapons again?”

“The nerve! I bet you just want to say that *you* lost because of your weapon!”

Ignoring the knight, I traded my Fairy Sword for a dulled practice sword that a squire brought me.

“Let’s go, you brat!”

The yellow-spear knight attacked from outside the range of the sword, a standard strategy; I dodged each of his attacks easily as I slowly made my way closer to him.

“I-impossible! Why isn’t it hitting?!”

I mean, that’s because I’m using the “Foresight: One-on-One Battle” skill to start avoiding your attacks before they happen.

Once I had gotten close enough, I used my sword to knock his spear aside and smacked his undefended torso with the simple, Spellblade-less practice blade.

I held back so I wouldn’t cut straight through him, but it still put a serious dent in his armor, and the knight was sent flying sideways.

“Well, you’re certainly a league above him. Your skills would be wasted on an idiot like Jagou—let me try them out instead.”

Lady Ryuona licked her lips and unsheathed her scythe.

“No, I’ve got the next match.”

I didn’t remember promising any such thing, but Sir Gouen eagerly interrupted Lady Ryuona and came toward me instead.

“I don’t think so, old Gouen.”

“Go get Liza to play with you instead.”

“Liza?” Ryuona tilted her head.

She must not have seen Sir Juleburg’s fight with Liza earlier.

Her gaze turned toward Liza, who was sparring with the Holy Knights.

“Ooh, very nice. She’s just my type.”

Swinging her scythe over her shoulder, Ryuona strolled excitedly over to where Liza was fighting.

“Let’s do this, Satou.”

Once Lady Ryuona was gone, Sir Gouen bared his pearly white teeth at me.

A little ways away, I heard Arisa mutter, “Don’t you mean ‘shall we do it?’” and snicker to herself. I don’t know what she was joking about, but knowing her, it was probably some yaoi-related internet meme.



“Nice moves, Satou!”

I dodged Sir Gouen’s two-handed sword with sharp steps.

Unlike fighting Jagou before, it was difficult to avoid his attacks even with the “Foresight: One-on-One Battle” skill.

He didn’t use techniques like Sir Juleburg’s “Gap Attack,” but he was able to move his huge sword remarkably quickly, feinting as if to make big swings, only to turn those feints into perfectly timed swipes at hard-to-dodge angles.

“You too!”

He was like the ultimate form of an orthodox swordsman with both power and speed.

If someone assumed from his muscular appearance that he was a purely power-oriented fighter, they would probably learn their lesson quickly and painfully.

Whenever his sword came toward me at an angle I couldn’t fully dodge, I used “Spellblade” just for a second to parry with my Fairy Sword.

Otherwise, I kept jumping left and right to avoid the two-handed sword.

It was fun to fight him, just like fighting Hayato the Hero.

It sort of felt like a high-level fighting game, trying to read each other’s moves.

“You’re not gonna win just by dodging!”

The speed of Sir Gouen’s strikes kept increasing as I avoided them.

Once in a while, he deliberately left an opening for me, so I made a modest feint of an attack, pretending to fall for it.

“Hah, nice try!”

I thought he was going to dodge or parry and then counterattack, but he had figured out that I was feinting, and he charged toward me without dodging.

I avoided the two-handed sword as it swung down toward me with a roar, but my “Sense Danger” skill set off alarms in my head as I was about to try an attack of my own.

Just as I bent one knee and ducked, Sir Gouen’s backhand chop swept through the air where my head had been seconds ago.

“You dodged that, too?!”

Sir Gouen gave a manly grin.

The scratch I’d made on his cheek a few moments ago was already fading.

“It’s continuous healing with ‘Light Magic.’ If you try to drag out a battle with a ‘Light Magic’ user, it’s only gonna end poorly for you.”

Looking at my AR display, I saw that it was gradually restoring not only his HP but also his stamina.

“Unlike Sir Juleburg, I don’t give myself any pointless handicaps,” he said with a broad smile.

Sorry. I might be more like Sir Juleburg.

He swung down his sword with a smile still on his face; as I parried the blow, this time he sent a kick flying toward me from my blind spot.

Since I wasn’t in a good position to dodge it, I caught it with my hand instead.

Oof, that’s heavy.

If I tried to completely stop the kick’s momentum, I might break Sir Gouen’s knee. Instead, I flipped myself onto his leg and used the motion to launch

myself into the air with my arms.

“Seriously?!” I heard someone exclaim from afar.

As the sword came after me, I spun in midair and blocked it with my Fairy Sword.

There was a high-pitched clang and a shower of sparks as the two Magic Swords met, bathing us in red light.

“Damn!”

“How’d he block that?”

“It’s crazy how Sir Gouen just kept going after him, too!”

There were cheers from the crowd.

“Yeah, that was crazy, but what the hell?”

“I’m sure Sir Heim or Lady Ryuona could do something like that, right?”

“No way, not a chance.”

I heard a few comments besides cheers, too, but I ignored those.

> Title Acquired: “Tumbler”

> Title Acquired: “Acrobat”

I ignored the slander from the title system, too, and focused on fighting.

Landing behind Sir Gouen, I spun around and struck with a sideways sweep of my Fairy Sword.

He seemed to be thinking the same thing, as his sword came from the opposite direction and clashed against my own with another flash of red light.

Just as he pulled back, I twisted around again and used that momentum to slash diagonally from the opposite side, this time with a little more force than before.

My blade stopped with a sharp clang.

Sir Gouen had used the same move as I had to swing his sword from the other side.

The shock waves from our swords colliding shook the ground below us.

We locked swords for a few moments longer, then both jumped back at about the same time.

“‘Blink’—‘Burst Hacker’!”

As soon as he landed, Sir Gouen used “Blink” to close the distance between us again and broke out the special move he’d shown off in the fight against the intermediate demon.

For real?

Don’t use that against a human, dude—especially in a sparring match!

If I blocked it head-on, my Fairy Sword might get damaged. Instead, I applied layers of Spellblade to the blade before parrying.

As soon as our swords touched, there was an even bigger flash of red light, sparking in and out like a strobe effect.

Sir Gouen’s blade scratched off layers of Spellblade as it passed, the flying red sparks grazing my cheek and hair.

I kept my sword from being blown away with my maxed-out muscle strength.

> Skill Acquired: “Spellblade Coating”

Huh, I got some weird skill.

“Whew, you avoided that move, too?” Sir Gouen released his “Spellblade” and stuck his sword into the ground. “I’m out of magic. I give—”

“I give up.” Before he could surrender, I interrupted, pretending to drop my sword. “I hurt my wrist just now. It’s against explorer policy to keep fighting when you’re wounded, so let’s wrap up for now.”

I used my “Fabrication” skill to make a vague excuse.

As a bonus, I even feigned my hand going numb.

“Heh, you’re a funny guy.”

Sir Gouen seemed to have seen right through my act, but he was nice enough to laugh it off without further comment.

Hm?

As I leaned down to pick up my Fairy Sword, I noticed something metal on the ground.

It was a brooch with a strange design of eight swords forming a ring.

“Ahh, that’s my sword-ring badge.”

I placed the brooch in Sir Gouen’s outstretched hand.

It must’ve gotten knocked off his clothes in our battle.

“It’s proof that I’m in the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, received from His Majesty when I first joined. You’ll be wearing one soon enough, too, Satou.”

No, I don’t think so.

I wished he wouldn’t say things like that so confidently, making it seem inevitable.

“You have a guest, Sir Gouen.”

“A guest? I didn’t have any meetings planned today...”

Sir Gouen tapped his chin thoughtfully.

“I’m told it is a messenger from your family. I have them waiting in parlor six.”

“All right. Tell them I’ll be right there.” Sir Gouen turned back toward me. “Sorry, but I’ve gotta go. Let’s get a drink sometime, yeah? I’ll get us a reservation somewhere good.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it,” I responded, assuming it was just lip service.

“And I’ll tell you all about how I met my wife and how adorable my children are.”

Nope. Apparently, he really meant it.

With a jaunty, masculine wave, Sir Gouen walked away, past the crowd of Holy Knights.



“Master...?”

“Mr. Heim is amazing, sir!”

Tama and Pochi came back from their consultation with Sir Heim, looking excited.

He’d taught them how to quickly use “Body Strengthening,” feinting techniques, and other moves.

“Zoom and then kapooow...?”

“And clinkety clank, sir!”

They tried to explain how amazing Sir Heim was, but it was a bit hard to follow.

Clearly, they had really enjoyed it, though.

“Thank you very much. It seems like you taught them a lot.” Since Sir Heim had returned as well, I bowed in thanks and apology. “Sorry to have taken advantage of your offer and left them with you for so long.”

“Not at all. These two are going to grow up strong. See that you take good care of them.”

With that, he waved and walked away.

Wow, what a gentleman.

“I had no idea Sir Heim loved kids so much. I always thought he and Sir Gouen seemed to get along well—maybe that’s the real reason.”

Lady Helmina, who’d been watching the three of them, put her elbow on my shoulder and leaned on me.

“Mrrr, guilty.”

“H-hey, quit hanging all over our master!”

Mia and Arisa pushed between Lady Helmina and me.

“Ah-ha-ha, sorry. Sir Pendragon here just reminds me a lot of my younger brother back home,” she replied lightly. “I wanted to try fighting you guys, too, but my specialization in guns isn’t great for close combat with warriors. And since the point of guns is to shoot from a distance, it’d be tough in this little arena.”

I had to agree, even if I did use dual-wielded guns against the demons in Labyrinth City.

“E-erm, excuse me...”

Lulu, who’d been watching quietly, timidly approached Lady Helmina.

“What is it?”

“Did you say you’re a gun user?”

“That’s right. I’m the number-one shooter in the Shiga Kingdom, Helmina the Gun Saint.”

“That’s amazing!”

Lulu clapped her hands together.

“My dear sister Lulu is amazing, too, though! She’s the gun user of the mithril explorer team Pendragon, you know!”

“A-Arisa, stop!”

Lulu hurriedly interrupted her younger sister’s bragging.

“Wow, that’s unusual. I didn’t think there were any other girls who used such antique weapons.”

“Master taught me how to use them.”

“Hmm, Sir Pendragon did, eh?” Lady Helmina shot me a meaningful glance. “Well, all right, then. It seems like anything goes with this guy, so I won’t make any comments.”

Yes, please do refrain.

“More importantly, I want to see your skills. There’s a shooting range for guns and bows over there. Shall we go?”

Lulu looked toward me for permission; I nodded.

Liza still seemed to be in the midst of her sparring marathon with the Holy Knights, which meant we probably still had some time to kill.

Lady Helmina led us to a 500-meter shooting range, surprisingly large for the middle of a city.

“Want to give it a try?”

“Yes, please!”

Lulu drew a gun from her Fairy Pack.

She hesitated a minute, probably waffling between her Fire Rod Gun or a gun with real ammo, but ended up choosing a sniping-oriented rifle.

It was one of my more recently developed rifles, the kind that produced very small acceleration gates, which used a small amount of gunpowder to produce high-speed and high-powered bullets.

Unfortunately, it fell far short of Lulu’s main weapon, the Acceleration Gun, in terms of firepower; it was a little weaker than her secondary weapon, the Fireburst Gun, too, but faster, with a longer range.

But since it used real bullets, they were affected by gravity, too, making it an additional challenge for long-range shooting.

“I’ll try.”

Lulu fired her first shot with the rifle.

A miss.

She adjusted and fired again.

“...Wuh?”

Lady Helmina’s jaw dropped as she looked at the results.

“I’m sorry, I still missed a little.”

“No, no, you definitely hit it! ...I mean, how did you even hit the farthest target standing up? That’s for sniping, isn’t it? Usually, a Magic Gun for long-distance shooting needs to be supported by a Practical Magic or ‘Light Magic’ user before they can even hit that special target!”

“Really?”

Lulu looked taken aback by Lady Helmina’s intense expression.

“Really! And you were able to hit the target after just one measurement shot—truly incredible.” Lady Helmina folded her arms and nodded. “Sir Pendragon!

I must have this girl.”

“No way.”

“Come on, pleeease! I want to make her my successor! I’ll take good care of her, I promise.”

Lulu looked at me nervously.

“Not a chance. Lulu is my precious...”

Arisa and Mia stared at me seriously.

Feeling the pressure, I spoke my next words with great care.

“...family member.”

Lulu smiled so brightly I wished I could have snapped a photo, and Arisa and Mia both sighed with relief.

Afterward, Mia also showed off her skills with a short bow, causing Lady Helmina to embrace her and declare, “I’m adopting you!” much to Mia’s displeasure.



“That was more fun than I expected,” Arisa remarked.

“Yes, it made for excellent training.”

Liza nodded in satisfaction.

“Yessiir...”

“Pochi is going to practice what Mr. Heim taught us when we get home, sir.”

“Tama tooo...”

Tama and Pochi looked thoroughly satisfied as well.

“Nana, I wish to discuss training programs with you.”

“Very well, I agree.”

The eldest sister, Adin, was talking to Nana about training.

Seeing how quickly Nana had grown, the rest of her sisters were all eager to train in the labyrinth as well.

If possible, I wanted to have them undergo basic training with the elf teachers in Bolenan Forest before they trained in the labyrinth, like Nana and the other girls had.

Once we got home, I was thinking of using the Space Magic spell Telephone to contact the high elf of Bolenan Forest, my beloved Lady Aaze, to get permission.

“Liza and Nana really brought home the wins today,” said Arisa. “Let’s celebrate with a feast!”

“Tria wishes to cook sakura salmon.”

“Good idea. Let’s make a big variety of sakura salmon dishes for dinner tonight.”

The third sister, Tria, began discussing cooking with Lulu.

“Good idea. I’ll pitch in a few...”

“What’s wrong, master?”

Arisa looked at me in concern when I suddenly trailed off.

“Oh, isn’t that muscly guy one of the Shiga Eight?”

“Yeah. I’ll be right back—I want to check on him.”

The normally showy Sir Gouen was standing off to the side with a serious expression.

I didn’t want to stick my nose where it didn’t belong, but I was a little concerned, so I called out to him. “Is something the matter?”

“...Ah, Satou.” Apparently failing to notice my approach, Sir Gouen turned in surprise, then relaxed when he saw it was me. “No, it’s nothing. Just racked up too big a tab at the bar. I was trying to think of an excuse to ask the captain for an advance.”

“That sounds tough.”

Sir Gouen’s explanation seemed forced.

I wondered if his wife or family had asked him to mediate with Duke Vistall after his son’s rebellion, or something like that.

“But I’m sure Sir Juleburg would hear you out.”

I think it’s best to talk things out with a trusted superior at times like these.

“And if he won’t, I’d be happy to do whatever I can to help, even if it’s not much. Please feel free to call on me anytime.”

This didn’t seem like any of my business as an outsider, but it was probably fine to offer to hear out his complaints at the bar.

“I’d be happy to treat you to a few drinks,” I added half-jokingly.

“Heh, much appreciated. Make sure you invite me along next time you go out drinking.”

With that, Sir Gouen walked away, wearing a forced smile.

“Master...?”

Liza looked worried, as did the rest of the kids.

“I think I was worried about nothing. There’s still plenty of time before dinner. Why don’t we stop by some food stalls on the way home?”

“Meeeat...?”

“Pochi wants a meat-filled Mr. Galette, sir!”

I smiled at my group as they gave their usual responses, and we left the Holy Knights’ headquarters behind.

Sir Gouen’s face was still at the back of my mind.

The reason I had meddled in his business earlier was because his expression had struck me as that of someone with some kind of grim determination, like, “I just killed someone” or “I’m about to go kill someone.”

It didn’t seem like he could talk to outsiders about it, which is why I tactfully suggested that he should consult with Sir Juleburg instead.

Sir Juleburg seemed to have a lot of connections and enough negotiating power to wrest free one of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen’s seat appointments from the squabbling nobles. Surely he would help Sir Gouen solve whatever was troubling him.

Sir Gouen was wearing a forced smile right to the end, but he had at least lost his initial dark aura by the end of our conversation, so hopefully he wasn't going to do anything crazy in the immediate future.

I certainly hoped not, especially for the sake of his wife and children.

A New Business Venture

“Satou here. Investing capital at the end of the fiscal year usually just seems like a tax-saving strategy, but I think investing surplus funds for the sake of future profit is an important part of being in business. Besides, it’s good for the overall economy.”

“““Lord Kuro!”””

As soon as I emerged from the teleport room in the Echigoya headquarters, the head staff all greeted me with great excitement.

They always welcomed me, of course, but this time seemed much more intense than usual.

“Welcome back, Lord Kuro.”

The manager, Eluterina, finished checking her long blond hair in a mirror before flying to my side.

“What’s going on? Did something happen?”

“The rune light gems we just started carrying sold out completely on the first day.”

“We would like to request more inventory.”

As the manager grinned proudly, Tifaleeza appeared next to her, her silver hair bouncing in a short bob cut.

The other girls on the executive staff all nodded vigorously, too.

“I guess the name I suggested really was good.”

Louna, the short-statured noble girl who was always riding a stone wolf, giggled and puffed up her small chest proudly.

I had forgotten that she was the one who gave the name “rune light gems” to the light stones with runes carved into them.

I patted her head lightly, then produced a box of more rune light gems from my Item Box and handed it to Eluterina.

They explained that in the morning when sales began, only a few regulars picked them up in passing, but some Ougoch Duchy nobles and merchants heard about them and started scrambling to buy them up, and by the end of the day they were sold out of all except the display model, with plenty more reservations besides.

The fact that the rune light gems flew off the shelves for ten gold coins a pop, despite not having any particular effect, must have been because of the skills of the engravers we employed.

“Also, the ‘mental training toy’ magic tools you gave us the recipe for have been selling almost as quickly as the rune light gems.”

They hadn’t sold much at first, Eluterina said, but once the staff made announcements and gave out some free samples to the nursery at the royal academy, that led to their selling like hotcakes to noble children. Evidently there were tons of reservations for these, too.

This particular product was actually a magic power manipulation practice toy that I originally developed for the kids at our private orphanage. The toys came in many forms, like a wooden sword that made a noise when it was swung, a crystal lamp that lit up in different numbers, depending on the amount of magic power provided, and an instrument made with wind stones that produced different sounds when charged with magic.

I made the ones at the orphanage myself, but they were now being manufactured at the Echigoya Company using my recipe. The complicated core parts were made elsewhere and assembled with the rest here.

“And that isn’t all. I showed the gauntlets and bracelets you gave us that produce Practical Magic shields to just a few valued clients, but...”

Pushing Louna aside, Manager Eluterina gave me a report about the trial products I’d given her. These shield bracelets were magic tools that I’d initially made to protect Zena and her friends.

“Well, we ended up saying that we’ll take reservations for them at three

hundred gold coins apiece, and there are at least twenty customers who want to be contacted when preorders begin...”

Since no one could make these but me, I had suggested testing them to see if there was any demand for them at an absurdly high price.

I figured they might sell to collectors of unusual things, but I certainly wasn’t expecting so many interested customers.

Unlike the shield bracelets I gave to Zena and other friends, the ones being sold at the Echigoya Company were downgraded versions that only produced a Shield about as strong as a beginning Practical Magic user might make, but I guess the unusual nature of the item won out over its lackluster performance.

“What kind of customers were interested?”

“The gauntlet was popular with imperial knights and upper nobles for self-defense. The bracelet was the same way, but there were more upper nobles and wealthy individuals who wanted to give them to their heirs or daughters.”

That was more or less what I expected.

“Lord Kuro...before we deliver on the preorders, I’d like to present one of the bracelets that you gave us for the storefront window to the royal family. Is that all right?”

When I asked her the reason later, she said that it was not only a matter of noble manners and accepted business practice, but also a way to potentially use the king and royal family to advertise.

“That’s fine. If you think you can use them, you’re all welcome to wear them, too.”

Since I could mass-produce them relatively quickly with my magic production device, I had made a bunch of prototype samples.

The samples I gave them before were simple brass bracelets, with decorations by the engravers employed by the Echigoya Company.

““““Yes, Lord Kuro!”””” the staff all exclaimed happily.

“A-are you sure it’s all right, Lord Kuro?”

“Sure.”

I nodded at the worried-looking manager.

The price was high, since I was currently the only person who could make them, but the actual materials cost only a few gold coins apiece.

“As far as the actual sales—how many will we be able to produce?” Eluterina asked hesitantly.

“Probably about two hundred a year.”

“““Two hundred...”””

The other staff all widened their eyes along with the manager.

“The cost price is fifty gold coins. I’ll let you determine the selling price, manager.”

“Then let’s sell a limited amount to upper nobles at first, then reduce the price when their popularity has died down a bit.”

If we sold two hundred in a year, they shouldn’t seem too rare after a while.

And since they were being sold on consignment, they wouldn’t have an effect on the Echigoya Company’s cash flow, either, I hoped.

“Lord Kuro, would it be possible to change the material of the bracelets?”

Tifaleeza proposed that if we were going to adjust the price, we might want to change the appearance accordingly.

“All right. Make a list of how many we should make with what materials. I’ll bring that to the magic tool craftsman and get them made. Don’t forget to list order of priorities, too.”

It was a pain to figure out fine details like that, so I left it all in their capable hands.



“As it stands, the Echigoya Company’s income is significantly in the black, even excluding your sales of the Magic Swords and airships, Lord Kuro.”

After I caught up with the executive staff, I accompanied Eluterina and

Tifaleeza to a parlor connected to the manager's room to discuss the company's current income and future developments.

“And the payment from the kingdom?”

“We were told that it exceeds the amount of the kingdom's gold reserve, so we're receiving it in the form of money orders for five hundred gold coins at a time.”

Money orders from the kingdom could be exchanged for money at government offices, or even used directly as payment at large companies and business guilds.

“All right. I'll deliver the skypower engines for the rest of the airships soon after this.”

With the kingdom's shipbuilding capabilities, new large-scale airships could only be produced once or twice a year, which is why I intended to produce one at the Echigoya Company's shipyard, too.

Starting in the next year, we would take on the tasks of updating older airship models and creating smaller-scale airships, too.

I had enough materials to make skypower engines for more than a hundred airships, but I had decided to sell only a limited number for large airships for now.

According to Mukuro the Bone Lord, who I met in the Lower Stratum, the act of constructing things like railroads and radio towers was considered taboo by the gods. Given this, I wanted to avoid producing too many large airships that would allow for mass transportation.

Besides, airships required a great deal of monster cores to run. Cores were necessary for the production of magic tools and potions, too, and it would have a serious effect on the lives of ordinary citizens if they suddenly went way up in price because of a sharp increase in demand, which I was trying to avoid.

“We'll need a use for all this capital...”

I gazed at the columns full of enormous numbers that we'd received through money orders.

Saving money was important for individuals, but for a corporate body, I felt that putting away a huge amount of money without gaining any significant interest was no better than hoarding.

I had bought up a large amount of the metal ingots, scrap gems, and so on that I needed for my crafting hobbies by way of the Echigoya Company, but those costs were so trivial compared to our massive profit that it hardly seemed like I'd used enough.

"Then how about we expand our business?"

"Hmm," I murmured, prompting the manager to continue. "Do we have enough people?"

"Merchants, craftsmen, researchers, and intellectuals have all come to us seeking employment with the Echigoya Company. We've finished sorting through them, so if you give us permission to hire them, we can increase our staff immediately."

"All right. Show me a list later. As long as there aren't any problems, I'll let you employ them at your discretion."

I figured I could check them on the map, just to make sure we weren't hiring any demon lord worshippers or weirdos like that.

"We've also had requests for investments from artists and scholars. What do you think?"

Basically, they were looking for patrons.

I looked over the list Tifaleeza handed me of names, representative works, areas of expertise, and other materials prospective candidates had submitted. There was even a column with the staff's opinions and impressions from interviews and interactions.

I did a quick map search and crossed out any names that came up with problems.

"You can invest in anyone except the names I've crossed out. I'll let you decide how much to pay each of them."

"Shall we base it on a value assessment?"

“Take their future potential into account, too. Besides, it’s difficult for basic researchers to produce easy-to-understand results. Try to invest in them for the long term, even if it’s only a small amount at a time.”

“Understood.”

With that, the conversation ended.

I certainly never imagined that I’d become a patron to artists and scholars in another world, though.

“Shall we fund anything else?”

At Eluterina’s words, my thoughts went to the poor people and refugees we saw in the slums of the lower capital.

“The standard of living and safety seems poor in the low-income areas. I’d like to give jobs to the people there.”

“Understood. When we present the bracelet to the royal family as we discussed, I’ll speak to His Excellency the prime minister and let him know that we plan to start working to reduce unemployment, and perhaps I’ll request favorable treatment as far as taxes go, accordingly.”

Eluterina and Tifaleeza immediately nodded and began discussing how to carry out my vague request.

“While we can certainly hire skilled laborers at the Echigoya Company...the issue is the majority who may only be suited to general labor.

“We’ve already hired as many laborers to work on building the shipyard as we can manage, and once the airships are in production there, I’m afraid we can’t bring in any workers with unclear backgrounds. Even if we were to open up food stalls or cafés like in Labyrinth City, we could only hire a few dozen to perhaps a hundred people at most, which wouldn’t solve our problem, either.”

I remembered the broken-down factory I’d purchased from an unsuccessful business.

“How about a new factory?”

“Ah, the former cotton mill. We purchased the equipment along with the building, but we won’t be able to resume operations there right away since the

machinery has degraded with time. Besides, the raw cotton we would need as material is produced in the southern parts of Vistall Duchy, but it has currently increased in price due to the demons that wreaked havoc in Lessau County recently, so we wouldn't be able to make a profit, even if the factory was currently functional."

I see. So that's affected a lot of things even outside Lessau County.

"What's causing the price jump?"

"Shipping expenses. Some of the roads have been destroyed or become unsafe, making transportation difficult."

The only options were to take a longer route by way of Eluette Marquisate or hire an increased number of guards, hence the rise in price.

"And there are problems even within Vistall Duchy, to the point where war could break out at any moment."

"Wow, you pick up information fast."

That probably had to do with the airship attack the day before yesterday...

"Thank you very much, Lord Kuro... Since the place where raw cotton is produced might become a battlefield, it's possible that the fields will be burned, making it impossible to acquire cotton next year. In the worst-case scenario, the war might go on for so long that we would have to import it from elsewhere."

There were other territories that produced cotton on a smaller scale, but Vistall Duchy and Ougoch Duchy were the only places that produced enough cotton to meet the needs of the royal capital.

In the case of the latter, there was a significant distance by land, and transportation by sea was dangerous; they usually only exported processed cotton goods as a result.

"So, that means there's an excess of cotton in Vistall Duchy, right?"

Tifaleeza nodded.

"Do we have anyone in the company who might have connections with cotton farmers or wholesalers in Vistall Duchy?"

“We do. Merina’s mother is from the southernmost city there.”

Eluterina opened the door to the parlor and called in Merina from the gaggle of executive girls who were clearly eavesdropping outside, then explained the situation to her.

“My aunt is involved with the cotton industry and knows other nobles who are involved, as well as some wholesalers and farmers in the area.”

“Perfect. Then we’ll send you to Vistall Duchy, Merina. Buy up as much cotton as you can wherever it’s not overpriced. I’ll transport you there myself.”

She probably needed time to collect her things, but I could just put it all in Storage and have things taken care of within a few hours.

This might cause trouble for other people who made their money off cotton, but it was better than letting it get burned up in battle, or having farmers get stuck in unfair trades and lose money.

“I’ll get ready!” Merina exclaimed, and rushed from the room.

The hallway grew noisy, probably because I’d told her she could bring two people with her.

“Lord Kuro, am I to assume that we should begin preparing the cotton factory for use by repairing the building and machinery?”

I nodded at Tifaleeza. “We’ll employ anyone who can’t get work at the cotton factory for welfare work with the Echigoya Company.”

“Welfare work?”

“That’s right. We can do a soup kitchen like that Pendragon kid was running in Labyrinth City.”

Since I was in charge of a corporate body, I was hoping to put someone else in charge of welfare work and other such things.

“Separate from the soup kitchens offered by the kingdom and temples, you mean?”

“Yes. Just to be clear, the charity aspect is just a bonus. We’ll send out people with skills like ‘Analyze Character’ and find anyone with hidden, useful skills.”

“I see. We can use that for when we need to hire temporary labor, too.”

“And for gathering information. Although we’ll need to take care not to infringe on the rights of the beggars’ guild.”

When I made up a vague excuse, Eluterina and Tifaleeza were surprisingly quick to go along with it.

I had never seen beggars in modern Japan, but in the Shiga Kingdom it was considered a real profession. Though it was hidden in the downtown area in the royal capital, there was even an association; in addition to begging by the roadside, they also ran side businesses like information-gathering and stakeouts. It was sort of like a thieves’ guild in a video game.

“I’ll leave the rest to you.”

Once I gave them general direction, it was probably fine to leave the details up to them.

We discussed a few other details like property-buying and leasing. Then I brought Merina and company to Vistall Duchy to arrange for the purchase of cotton, and finally the day’s work was done.

I searched the map while we were in Vistall County, but I didn’t see any rebellion underway. Still, the armed forces were preparing for war, and I saw armed knights and soldiers running around in the city looking busy and tense.

The citizens seemed to be aware of this situation, too. There were less groceries available in the markets than usual, and the prices were beginning to rise.

I guess war causes trouble for everyone, no matter what world you’re in.



“Huh, so this is the Echigoya Company’s royal capital location?”

“It’s a very fancy building, more so than the branch office in Labyrinth City.”

Arisa and Lulu looked up at the building, impressed.

Today, I was visiting the Echigoya Company as a customer, with the rest of my group in tow.

Nana's sisters seemed to be in shock after seeing her in action at the Holy Knights' headquarters the day before: They had taken up jogging to improve their stamina on Liza's recommendation, and so they weren't around when we left in the morning.

"Lots of peeeople...?"

"Very crowded, sir."

Tama and Pochi seemed impressed with the bustling state of the storefront.

It made sense, given the sales numbers Tifaleeza had shown me, but I wasn't expecting it to be thriving to this extent.

"Master, there are many cute accessories, I report."

When there was enough room to do so, we split into small groups to look around the shop.

The first and second floors focused mainly on goods made in Labyrinth City and on accessories created by royal capital craftsmen; the third floor had magic tools like rune light gems and the Shield gauntlets; and the fourth floor was a private area for nobles and our best customers.

The hand-cranked electric fans, juicers, and mixers I made in Labyrinth City were also on sale on the third floor.

"Mia! There is a rabbit doll, I report."

"Where? Show me."

Mia pushed through the crowd to get to Nana.

"Cute." She hugged the doll and rubbed her cheek against it.

"You like it?"

"Soft."

Mia held the rabbit doll up to me.

It was made with monster materials that created an unusual texture.

"That is nice. Makes you want to keep touching it."

"Mm. Agreed."

“Master, I wish to touch it, too, I declare.”

I let Nana experience the strange texture, too.

“It is squishy and fluffy and crumply, I report.”

Nana seemed to like it, too, given that she was now refusing to let go of the rabbit doll.

“Huh, is it really all that?”

“You want to touch, too, Arisa?”

“Sure, if you insist—owwie!”

Arisa reached toward my stomach, but I smacked her hand to stop her.

I wish she wouldn’t try to sexually harass me so casually.

“Jerkyyy...?”

“Frog jerky, sir.”

“They have rock lizard jerky, too.”

The beastfolk girls had found the explorers’ section of sorts, where they were staring intently at a shelf of packed meals for explorers.

As always, they were far more interested in food than in anything else.

The salesperson told me that this explorers’ section was very popular with royal capital kids who admired explorers.

“Checking out the accessories, Lulu?”

“Hmm?”

I saw Lulu through the crowd and went over to greet her.

Peering over her shoulder, I saw that she was actually looking at some kind of gemstone, not an accessory.

“Oh, no, I was just admiring this cute rock salt.”

There were all different colors of rock salt carved into different shapes.

Most of them were transparent, pink, red, or yellow, but there were a few rarer colors like blue and green.

I wasn't sure if they were natural or if an alchemist had changed the colors, but they were all very pretty.

"I've heard that they taste a little different, depending on where they're from."

"Huh, that's interesting. Want to buy some from each region and test out what dishes they'd go best with?"

"Yes, that sounds wonderful!"

Lulu nodded with a big, beaming smile.

It was so adorable that my heart almost stopped.

"Sir Pendragon...?"

I turned around to see Tifaleeza, who had beautiful features in a different way from Lulu.

"Oh, hello there. Don't mind us."

I was careful to avoid talking like Kuro as I greeted her.

"I'm terribly sorry to disrupt your shopping, but would you happen to have a moment to spare?"

"Sure, that's fine."

I told the rest of my group to keep shopping and followed Tifaleeza to a room on the fourth floor.

But I certainly wasn't expecting the topic that Eluterina brought up.

"...Maid outfits and women's undergarments?"

"Yes, I saw what Lulu was wearing in Labyrinth City. It's far cuter than the Shiga Kingdom's usual maid outfits, so I think it would be popular here, too..."

Oh, thank goodness.

I thought she'd seen Lulu's underwear for a second there.

"And then there's the custom-made underwear that Nana was wearing. Arisa showed me a sample, and I think the royal capital nobles would love them, too."

“You mean you want to sell them through the Echigoya Company?”

“Yes. If they’re made in the Muno Barony, perhaps we could import them, or —”

She was interrupted by a knock on the door, and Tifaleeza came into the room with Arisa and Lulu in tow.

“Ms. Lulu, Ms. Arisa, I’m sorry to call you up here while you’re shopping.”

Eluterina gestured for them to sit on a sofa.

“What can we help you with?”

“As I was just explaining to Sir Knight, I’d like to sell tailor-made underwear and maid outfits through the Echigoya Company. I spoke to Vicount Lottel to ask for permission, and she said that Arisa was the one who made them and that I should get permission from her and Sir Knight instead.”

“Okey-dokey, it’s fine by me. It’s a dream of mine and master’s to spread cute bras, undies, and maid outfits throughout the world. Right, master?”

Don’t make me sound like some kind of maid fanatic. I mean, I do love maids, though.

“Yes, I agree with Arisa.”

“Thank you so much for giving permission so readily. If I could possibly trouble you for the patterns...”

“Way ahead of you, girl. Here, take these. There’s lots of bras, but I think nobles would probably like these kinds the best.” Arisa was already pulling out sewing patterns from her Fairy Pack and putting them on the table. “Those are originals, though, so I’ll need ’em back once you copy them.”

“R-right...um, thank you.”

Eluterina looked like she was having trouble keeping up with Arisa’s high-speed actions.

She reached for the patterns, but Tifaleeza stopped her.

“This is what we had in mind as far as payment for the use of the patterns.”

Tifaleeza held out a written contract detailing that a certain percentage of

sales would go to us.

Ah, I see, she wants to get the contract figured out before accepting the patterns.

“Payment? You can have them for free if you want?”

“No, we couldn’t possibly,” Eluterina said smoothly. “You’ve already kindly helped us out for free in Labyrinth City, but now that our business is on track, we simply cannot accept all the profits one-sidedly. We believe that profits should be fairly distributed.”

“Ooh, aren’t you professional. I like your style! All right, I’ll accept the payment.”

Arisa scratched under her nose and agreed to the manager’s proposal.

“By the way, this is a pretty unusual way to calculate payment, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it may be a bit unconventional, but we chose to calculate payment based on a percentage of sales instead of on a flat rate per garment,” Tifaleeza answered.

“I like it. That way it won’t get in the way of the products becoming popular with the general public, and we’ll both get plenty of returns if you sell them to nobles at a nice premium.”

“I’m honored that you understand our approach.”

Tifaleeza gave a rare, satisfied smile.

“I do have one condition for the contract, though. Is that all right?”

“What might that be?”

“I’d like to add a clause that it has to be clear when they’re sold that the place of origin is Muno Barony, and I’m the designer. Anything else, master?”

“No, that’s fine with me.”

Tifaleeza got permission from Eluterina to add the condition to the contract, and they rewrote it and signed it on the spot.

“We’d like to arrange payment to your account at the guild of commerce...”

“Oh, I don’t have an account. You can just send it to master’s, please.”

Despite what she said, Arisa was the copyright holder for the undergarments and maid outfits. I thought it was only right that she should get the payment for them directly.

“We can just make you an account.”

“Sir Knight, I’m afraid slaves cannot open accounts with the guild of commerce,” Tifaleeza informed me.

“Wait, really?”

“Yes, since Shiga Kingdom law treats slaves as property of their masters.”

Oh, that’s right.

“Hmm. What to do, then...”

“It’s fine, master. We’re like husband and wife anyway, so we might as well share a bank account.”

Arisa smiled and joked to lighten the mood.

“If you really must have the money sent to Arisa’s own account, perhaps you could make her an explorers’ guild account instead?”

Once things settled down, Eluterina made a suggestion.

“An explorers’ guild account...?”

“That’s right. The fees are higher than they are at the commerce guild, and you can only make deposits or withdrawals in Celivera or the royal capital, but anyone with a mithril badge or higher is allowed to open an account with the explorers’ guild, regardless of their social standing.”

It sounded a little inconvenient, but we decided to make an account for Arisa with the explorers’ guild and deposit the payments there. I figured we could stop by the Ministry of Labyrinth Resources office on the way back to open the account.

“So, since you wanted to talk to Lulu, too, were you maybe hoping to buy cooking recipes as well?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

Eluterina explained that they wanted to open food carts and cafés in the royal capital like in Labyrinth City and hire low-income workers and others looking for jobs.

We had no reason to decline. Lulu agreed to sell her recipes and receive a percentage of the sales in her own account. Lulu wanted to refuse payment, but I flexed my rarely used authority as master to insist that she accept it.

I agreed to order some cooking magic tools from Akindoh for the food carts.

Of course, Akindoh is a fictional merchant who works with the Pendragon family. I figured I could just disguise myself as him and deliver the tools sometime soon.

“Say, if you want to employ more people, why not try making food cart or café franchises, too?”

“What is a franchise?”

Eluterina tilted her head at the unfamiliar word.

Arisa explained: “Basically, we provide someone who has funds, along with knowledge and supplies, to manage their own food cart or café, and we get a percentage of their earnings in exchange. People without enough funds can just be employed, and they have the option to become owners themselves if they save up enough funds. It’s nice and aspirational, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s a lovely idea. Please let us consider that proposal. If Lord Kuro permits it, we’ll officially offer you payment for the franchise concept as well.”

Eluterina seemed very interested in the idea of starting a franchise.

Arisa immediately started suggesting light café food options like *omurice* and kids’ meals.

“Do you have any other suggestions?”

“What about magic tools that are good for everyday life, like the ovens you use for the food carts? Since Mr. Akindoh brings them all the time, you could ask him next time.”

Arisa winked at me.

The extra step's not really necessary. I could just provide recipes or samples as Kuro...

“And these aren’t magic tools, but maybe you could offer some other convenient items, too?”

Arisa showed them a peeler I made for vegetables and explained how it worked.

For some reason, Tifaleeza took particular interest in this, murmuring, “Even I might be able to peel vegetables with something like this.”

“Oh, I know! Why not collect ideas from the public, too? Like a ‘Mildly Convenient Ideas Contest’ or something.”

“An idea contest? Would we really get useful ideas right away?”

“No, definitely not. But you could pay one silver coin even for silly ideas and just gather as many new ones as you can. Statistically, you’ll get a good idea eventually—just think of it as an investment until then.”

Arisa’s suggestion sounded familiar, although I couldn’t remember if it was some historical folklore from China or maybe just from a manga.

“It might be fun to put up all the ideas on a wall, too. Sometimes you might think of something new by looking at them, or other people might start a conversation by looking at the ideas. Maybe it’ll even form a whole community!”

Arisa was getting excited; she couldn’t seem to stop talking.

In the end, she kept spouting ideas until Mia got impatient and barged in with Nana to interrupt.

Eluterina seemed deeply impressed with all of Arisa’s ideas, to the point where she said she wanted to get Kuro’s permission to hire her as “Echigoya Company’s official advisor.”

Since Arisa seemed happy about the idea, too, I figured I might as well give permission.

The Pendragon Family's Daily Life

“Satou here. Sometimes, if you run into a dead end that you can’t break through on your own, someone else might be able to figure it out from a different point of view. Although sometimes you might just wander off course.”

“Satou!”

“Hello, Ms. Aaze.”

When I arrived in our tree house in the Bolenan Forest, I was greeted by none other than my beloved high elf, Lady Aaze, her long platinum-blond hair swaying.

I was visiting to introduce Nana’s sisters to the elf teachers. Of course, the rest of my group had come along as well.

“So those are Nana’s sisters you were telling me about.”

Since I’d explained the situation over the Space Magic spell Telephone, things had gone very smoothly.

“Nice to meet you all. I am Aialize, the high elf of Bolenan Forest. Any friend of Satou’s is a friend of mine. Feel free to call me Aaze.”

“““Understood. We shall call you Aaze.”””

Nana’s sisters nodded with their usual blank expressions.

“A high elf...? You’re one of the legendary high elves?”

“Incredible.”

“Tria is surprised, too.”

The eldest three of Nana’s sisters, at least, seemed to know about high elves.

“I-it is an honor to meet you, great Holy Tree of Bolenan Forest. We are homunculi, designed by Lord Trazayuya, created by our former master, Lord

Zen, and now servants of Master Satou. I am Number 1, now known as Adin. My sisters and I are eternally grateful for your compassion in allowing us to receive the teachings of the honorable elves.”

The other sisters all stared at Adin.

“Ithnani, Adin is acting strange.”

“Tria?”

The youngest sister, Huit, looked questioningly at the second-eldest, Ithnani, who immediately redirected her to Tria.

I guess Ithnani was even less talkative than I realized.

“Tria is surprised, too, but it isn’t strange. The learning apparatus taught Tria in World Knowledge III that Holy Trees are important figures who protect the world.”

The third sister, Tria, explained to the youngest sisters.

“Adin, bow.”

“Of course. Please, O Holy Tree, forgive our rudeness.”

The second-eldest pointed out a missing part of Adin’s greeting, and the two of them bowed.

““““We apologize for our rudeness, we declare.””””

The other sisters followed suit after Adin and Ithnani, bowing stiffly.

“No need to be so formal. As I said, any friend of Satou’s is a friend of mine, too. You may call me Aaze just like the other girls do.”

““““Yes, Aaze.””””

Again, the youngest five sisters all immediately agreed to Aaze’s request, and the eldest, Adin, scolded them, saying, “That’s *Lady* Aaze!”

Aaze said that no such titles were necessary, but then her priestess, Lua, happened to come in and call her “Lady Aaze,” so all the other sisters but Nana ended up calling her “Lady Aaze” from that point on.

“*Satou, candy!*”

“Candy, pleez!”

“I want some, too!”

Fairies, the doll-sized beings with wings like butterflies and dragonflies, came zooming in from the balcony of the tree house.

““““Larvae!””””

One of the fairies was caught immediately.

“Nana! Candy first.”

The fairy tried to escape, but the capturing hand refused to let go.

“That is my younger sister, Huit, not me, I declare.”

“Huh?”

““““LARVAE!””””

Nana’s sisters all flocked to the fairies.

Like Nana, they all seemed to adore small creatures. Even Adin was no exception, chasing the fairies around with her eyes sparkling.

“Geh!”

“So many Nanas!”

“This is bad.”

“Real bad!”

The fairies scattered, fleeing in all directions.

But it was impossible to escape from Nana and her sisters when their larvae senses had been activated, and the fairies were caught one after another.

Lady Aaze looked alarmed by the sudden developments.

“Satou, help us.”

“Help us, Aaze.”

I forced myself to stop admiring Aaze long enough to oblige with their request.

“Adin, Ithnani, Tria, Vier, Fünf, Seis, Huit! Let go of the fairies. Master’s

orders.”

““““Yes, master.””””

The words “master’s orders” were surprisingly effective; they released the fairies immediately.

“The fairies are citizens of Bolenan Forest, too. If you want them to like you, treat them like you would a small child, not a cute animal!”

““““Yes, master.””””

The sisters obediently changed their approach toward the fairies, but now the latter already had a negative impression of them and refused to let the sisters near them.

““““Master...””””

The sisters had little to no variation in their expressions, but they still sounded despondent, so I suggested that they give the fairies candy in my stead.

While the fairies didn’t seem thrilled, they couldn’t resist the allure of candy; they snuck up cautiously, snatched the candy away, and fled before coming back for more.

Fairies forget things quickly, though. I imagined they would treat the sisters normally again by the following day.



“Yo, Satou. These are the kids you wanted us to train, huh?”

Holding her magic Blue Rose Sword in its scabbard, Pochi’s teacher, Portomea, looked up at Nana’s sisters.

In spite of her uncouth way of speaking, she had beautiful, delicate features. Her wavy hair was cut just above her shoulders, her adorable face making her look like a doll.

“Teacher, sir!”

“Hey, it’s been a minute, Pochi! You wanna go?!”

“Yes, sir!”

Pochi's tail and arms waved happily as she ran over to Ms. Poa.

"Wait a minute, Poa. We're here to meet these girls today."

Tama's teacher, Shishitouya, an elf dressed in light samurai-like garb, scolded Ms. Poa. Tama stood nearby grinning, and Mr. Shiya patted her head.

"Shiya's right. Sorry, Poa, but can you wait to spar with your pupil until after our introductions?"

"Oh fine, Hiya."

Mr. Hishirotoya, Lulu's shooting teacher and the ringleader of the elf teachers, was able to rein in Ms. Poa.

"Sorry, Pochi. We'll have our fun later."

"Roger that, sir!" Pochi saluted cheerfully.

"So you're Nana's sisters, eh?"

Mr. Hishirotoya introduced Mr. Shiya and Ms. Poa, followed by a few later arrivals: Liza's teachers, the spriggan short spear user, Mr. Yusaku, and the quiet elf helix spear user, Mr. Gurgapoya; then Nana's teachers, the equally quiet elf and Magic Sword user, Gimasarua (Ms. Gia), and the dwarf shield user, Mr. Keriul.

"Are you all aiming to be shield users like Nana?"

"I am a shield user, but my younger sisters each have their own favored weapon." Adin spoke for the sisters. "We'd be deeply appreciative if you could teach them corresponding techniques."

"Tria wants to be a cook," Tria added, eliciting a smile from Mr. Hishirotoya.

"Then I'll introduce you to our chef, Nea, later. She's an expert in elf cooking—I'm sure you'll learn a lot from her."

"Thank you! Tria will do her best!" Tria smiled brightly and nodded.

"Oh, I know. If you like cooking, want to try learning how to use bows and traps, too? If you can procure your own birds and beasts, it'll be a great help for cooking while you're camping out."

"Tria is very intrigued!"

Unaware that she was playing right into Mr. Hishirotoya's hands, Tria happily agreed to train in marksmanship and traps.

Soon, the other sisters had all paired off with their own teachers, too, and they all went off to train.



"Master, we wish to engage in additional training, too, I request."

The beastfolk girls all chimed in agreement with Nana.

I guess their matches with the Shiga Eight Swordsmen had gotten them excited to get stronger.

"What about you, Lulu and Arisa?"

Mia wasn't around, as her parents had appeared shortly after our arrival in the tree house and carried her off.

"I'm going to bring some sakura salmon and mochi to Ms. Nea, and learn some new recipes from her."

"I think I'll go to the sewing workshop, since I've got some things to make for the Echigoya Company. We're staying in the tree house today, right?"

"Yeah, we'll head back tomorrow morning."

It would be nice to stay longer, but it was best not to leave our home in the royal capital empty for too long. We should've brought a few of the maids from Labyrinth City along to the royal capital.

"Now, where should we do the training..."

Our home turf in the Celivera Labyrinth would be an obvious choice, but considering that lately my group had been hunting so much they'd put a big dent in the monster population, it was probably best to go somewhere else.

"What about that place Viscount Nina and Baron Muno were talking about before?" Arisa suggested.

"Ah, you mean taking back the city that's been taken over by monsters?"

I was a little worried the monsters would get scared away by our group and run outside the city, potentially wreaking havoc on nearby villages.

“Why don’t you go take control of the City Core first and put a barrier around the city to blockade it?”

“Hmm, let’s see...”

I used my Space Magic spell Telephone to ask the desert City Core I controlled whether that was possible.

“What’s the verdict?”

“It wouldn’t be possible alone, but it’ll work if I link it with another City Core, it sounds like.”

I was worried about my City Core’s magic power stores, but it reported that it was already fully charged.

Since I was in control of a superior territory—probably the mana source in the Valley of Dragons—the City Core explained that it was able to recharge much faster than expected because of the massive amount of magic flowing from there.

“All right, shall we go?”

I had arrived at the unmanaged city in Muno Barony with my companions in tow, decked out in their secret armor, golden or otherwise. We used the Return spell and the small airship, so less than an hour had passed.

The city itself was treated as a separate map; as soon as we arrived above it, I used “Search Entire Map” to inspect the monsters in the city.

“So waaarm...”

“Hot and humid, sir.”

I inwardly agreed with the pair as I checked the information about the monsters.

Unlike the rest of Muno Barony, which tended toward the cooler side, the air above the city was as warm as an early summer day. This was probably an adjustment from the City Core.

“Lots of monsteers...?”

“So much Mr. Meat, sir.”

“That looks like a lot of snake meat. Since there are so many, perhaps we should collect the insect monsters afterward instead.”

Naga were monsters that looked like giant snakes with bat wings and four legs, which we saw frequently in the southeast of the neighboring Ougoch Duchy. Despite all appearances, they were actually incredibly tasty.

“Agreed, I declare.”

We looked down at the city from above, searching for a place to land.

Some flying monsters attacked along the way, but my bow, Nana’s Foundation, and the beastfolk girls’ throwing weapons made short work of them. Of course, I used Magic Hand to touch the corpses and put them into Storage.

“Master, a giant naga is coming from the castle!”

“Master, its colors are unpleasantly garish, I report.”

“That really is big for a naga.”

What is that, exactly?

In response to my query, a transparent pop-up window appeared on my AR display with the words “Elder Naga.”

It was level 50, the same as the areamasters we had hunted aplenty by now. Theoretically, this group could probably handle it, but it would be a tough fight against a flying monster without the three rear guard girls who specialized in long-range attacks.

“Let’s jump over and cut its wings off first.”

“Aye-aye.”

“Roger that, sir.”

I was about to fight it myself instead, but the girls seemed eager for a battle.

“I will use my new Foundation technique ‘Jet Javelin’ to attack its eyes, I report.”

The beastfolk girls looked shocked at Nana’s declaration; they nodded grimly, looking like they were fighting back tears.

“Is something wrong with attacking the eyes?” I asked.

“They’re yumyyy...”

“Very tasty, sir.”

I see. I guess I did have a younger relative who always ate her whole-cooked fish starting with the eyes at New Year’s.

“Then do you want me to take it down instead?”

“No, there are other naga. This one will serve not as a feast, but as experience points.”

Liza held back her sorrow as she gazed at the Elder Naga rising from the ground.

It made for a pretty dramatic scene, except she was really just giving up on the tastiest part of the monster.

“Let’s go!”

“Rally-ho~”

“Tally-ho, sir.”

“Fire, I declare.”

The instant the airship and the Elder Naga passed each other, the girls jumped over to it.

Nana’s “Jet Javelin” crushed one of the Elder Naga’s eyes, but the other one managed to escape unharmed.

However, while the Elder Naga was distracted by her attack, Pochi’s enlarged Magic Sword struck one of its wings.

Pochi’s strike was powered by spinning her entire body like a top, enough that it sliced right through the naga’s magic barrier and cut off one of its wings.

It hadn’t become a special attack skill just yet, but I imagined it would soon. Maybe it’d be called “Vanquish Slicer” or something?

“...Tama?”

As the Elder Naga plunged into a tailspin, Liza, Pochi, and Nana jumped back

onto the airship, but Tama was still hanging on to its neck. At first, I thought she had missed her chance to jump, but I changed my mind when I saw the look in her eyes.

Tama had a plan.

Falling backward toward the ground, the Elder Naga shifted at the last moment and crashed headfirst into the ground instead. A cloud of dust and rubble flew into the air.

The naga lay dazed, partway buried in the ground.

“It’s the ‘Naga Drop’ jutsu, sir!” Pochi exclaimed.

I guess I had seen some moves like that in ninja manga and fighting games.

Even at over level 50 with “Body Strengthening” that made her near-superhuman, I hadn’t expected Tama to pull off such a manga-like move in real life. I had to wonder whether the craziness came from the “Ninjutsu” skill or from Tama herself.

“Now is our chance, I declare.”

“Charge! Sir.”

“Let’s go.”

Nana, Pochi, and Liza jumped from the airship toward the base of the Elder Naga’s neck as it lay on the ground.

Their golden armor could definitely absorb a lot of shock, but it was still a pretty reckless thing to do.

“‘Blast Armor,’ I declare.”

Nana’s attack crushed what was left of the naga’s magic barrier and tough scales.

“‘Vanquish Strike,’ sir!”

“‘Draco Buster.’”

Pochi and Liza flew like two arrows of red light, piercing the broken scales side by side and shattering the Elder Naga’s neck.

That was a much quicker kill than I expected.

“Good work, you four. That was impressive.”

I landed the airship at the fortress ruins where the Elder Naga had landed and praised the group.

Then I put them in charge of destroying the monsters within the city limits while I took control of the City Core and put up a barricade around the city as planned.

“The blockade’s all set. Do you need a base?” I asked Liza through the use of Telephone.

“No, it’s all right. We’re hunting on the move.”

There were several other level-40-and-up monsters besides that Elder Naga when we first arrived, but the girls had already brought down half of them. Though the remaining monsters were level 30 and below, they numbered in the tens of thousands. Maybe running around hunting them was safer than fighting in a base and getting surrounded.

Liza told me that Nana wanted to ask me something, so I connected the Space Magic spell Telephone to her instead.

“Master, I request equipment that will speed up my rate of monster extermination.”

“All right, I’ll see what I can come up with.”

Nana’s armor was designed for defense against powerful opponents, but it wasn’t quite ideal for exterminating large swarms of monsters.

It would be tough to add any more features to her golden armor; I decided to try to make some kind of additional equipment for wiping out weaker monsters instead.

“Liza, I’m heading back to Bolenan Forest for now, but I’ll leave Telephone connected. If it looks like anything might go wrong, please contact me right away.”

“Understood.”

Liza sounded a degree more cheerful than usual. I couldn't help grinning to myself, picturing her excitedly chasing monsters around.

I used the Clairvoyance spell to check on everyone, then moved away from the city with "Flashrunning."

Before I returned to Bolenan Forest, I wanted to check on the old folks and kids who were living in our Muno Barony villa—the one that used to be a haunted fortress.

"Who goes there?!"

As I rode up to the gates on a golem horse, a young voice called out to me.

The gate was lowered most of the way, enough that a child could just barely enter by crouching down low.

Since Muno Barony was still far from being a safe place, these sorts of precautions were probably necessary.

"I am Akindoh, a merchant. Sir Pendragon sent me."

I was disguised as my fictional merchant alias.

"Is dat Mr. Pendragon's friend?"

"Go get Gramps, kiddo."

"Okey!"

The boy who'd stopped me sent a smaller child running back into the fortress.

I thought it was wisely cautious of him not to let me in just because I gave a familiar name.

Soon, the child came back with an older gentleman, the one who'd been a civil official in the Muno Marquisate days.

"So, you say Sir Knight sent you...?"

"Yes, my name is Akindoh. This is a dagger Sir Pendragon gave me with his seal on it."

"Aye, that's his seal, all right. Welcome, Mr. Merchant." The old man gave the signal for the gate to be lifted. "Hope ye don't mind if we hang on to yer

weapon. It's just us old folks and kids here, after all."

I gave him the dagger and the iron sword at my waist.

I checked in on them regularly with Clairvoyance, but the place gave a very different impression up close and in person.

Vegetables were growing in the garden we'd made, and there were fenced-in goats and orange chickens munching on weeds and vegetable scraps.

"No way!"

My eyes widened when I saw what a handful of elderly ladies and young girls were making in the garden.

"We have a guest?"

"Pardon my rudeness. Are you making dried gourds, by any chance?"

"Oh-ho, you know it?"

"There's lots of moonflowers what grow in these mountains. We dry the ones we don't get 'round to eating like this so they'll keep longer," an old woman explained.

I had no idea that moonflowers grew into bottle gourds, which could be used to make *kanpyou*, or strips of dried gourd, a classic Japanese cooking ingredient.

The elderly woman gave me a basic recipe and agreed to sell me some already dried gourds at a reasonable price.

"They're not really all that tasty, are they?"

"I'm going to use them for *makizushi*," I told the former civil official, and I apologized for my sudden outburst.

I wanted to make *makizushi* right there on the spot, but I'd have to come up with the best way to boil and season the *kanpyou* first, so I decided to hold off for the time being.

We relocated to a sitting room, and I asked about their lives and if there was anything they needed.

"Actually, we don't need a thing. Traveling merchants have been coming through lately."

Viscount Emerin had learned about this place when he was visiting his orchard outside Muno City, and he had kindly instructed his regular merchants to stop by here on their way to meet up for trade. I would have to thank him next time we met.

They added that this was a recent development; they'd sent me a letter about it, but it hadn't reached me just yet.

"Well, Sir Knight asked me to bring you these."

I gave them a set of magic potions for stamina, fever reduction, and other health-related concerns, as well as some mental training magic tools like the ones I gave out at the Labyrinth City orphanage. Since the old man who had once been a civil official could read, I left the written instructions with him.

"Oooh, what's dis?"

"It's a sword!"

"This one makes a funny noise!"

As the children started picking up the training toys and exclaiming happily, I quickly left the fortress behind.

Once I was out of sight, I used Return to teleport to Bolenan Forest, golem horse and all.



"All righty, production's finished."

I wiped my brow as I looked over all the magic tool core parts, magic ovens, and other home conveniences, which I was planning to deliver to the Echigoya Company.

They were all mass-produced versions of tools I had made before.

By using a combination of my magic production device and my original Practical Magic spell Data Output, which uploaded information from my Menu, I could reproduce the same magic tool many times incredibly simply.

It was a little tiring, though, since it required a lot of magic power.

As I took from Storage the blue-green tea Lulu had made for me in advance

and sipped it, I heard a bell summoning me from the underground research lab where I was working.

“Lord Satou, your guests have arrived.”

The voice coming through the intercom-style magic tool belonged to the house fairy, Mr. Gillil, who was in charge of the underground lab.

“Thank you, Gillil. Send them down here, please.”

“Of course, sir.”

Before long, Mr. Kiya and Ms. Doa from the elf magic tool workshop arrived by way of the teleport mirror, along with a few other engineers. For some reason, Ms. Aaze was with them, too.

After I greeted Mr. Kiya and company, I addressed Aaze behind them.

“It’s unusual to see you come all this way, Ms. Aaze. Is something the matter?”

“I’m sorry, Satou...”

Why is she apologizing?

“Good to see you again, Satou. We wanted to get your opinion on the newest update to our geosynchronous satellite observation golem, Kakashi MK 8—”

“Quit babbling, Keze of Bulainan! Satou, our jellyfish investigation deep-space golem Satellite One is coming along nicely. By the new year, it should be approaching the asteroid belt you mentioned.”

Keze, the high elf of the Bulainan clan, and Saaze, the high elf of the Beliunan clan, pushed past Aaze and started clamoring to talk to me.

The pair of them were particularly obsessed with research, even by the standards of their science-loving clans, and I’d helped them a bit with developing their outer space, or void, research golems.

“I see you’re here in person today, not just an image. Is it all right for high elves to leave their own World Tree?”

“Hmm? Sure, as long as we’re not on duty.”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Everyone but Aaze here has backup.”

They explained that they'd come by way of the fairy rings that linked the World Trees with teleportation.

Keze and Saaze both tended to talk at great length, so we decided to take care of my business before theirs.

"I see... So you want to improve on this."

"Incredible! How did you manage to integrate the magic circuits so well?!"

When I showed the Fortress defense feature I'd built into Nana's golden armor to Keze and Saaze, they were immediately fascinated.

Its defensive power was almost unnecessarily high, but the drawback was that it couldn't be moved once it was activated.

I had gathered the elf engineers to help me find a workaround for that weak point.

"The idea of putting a Holytree Stone furnace in an expanded subspace has existed for a long time, but no one like us has ever managed to successfully put it into practice."

"Usually, the huge amount of magic that leaks from the Holytree Stone furnace rips the subspace apart, or the conducting wires that supply the magic burn, or the boundary of the subspace wears down and breaks. It's incredibly difficult to implement."

Mr. Kiya and Ms. Doa were crossing their arms and staring in amazement, too.

I was only now finding out that even though it seemed like a simple idea in theory, there was a reason that it was almost never done in practice.

"So, you want to make this thing move?"

"That's probably not possible if you're using the principles of magic like Deracinator or Dimension Pile."

Ah, I was afraid of that.

"If you're also using Removable Deracinator, why not just switch everything over to that system?"

"Wouldn't that consume far too much magic when it deflects a large amount

of matter?”

“Well, if you don’t need to move it too many times, what about stationary walls that are disposable?”

Keze and Saaze offered some constructive suggestions.

“That’s impossible, Keze. Look how complicated these circuits are. Once you disposed of one wall, it would take ages before you could create a new one. That’s fine for everyday use, but it’d never hold up to the speed of battle.”

“As usual, you’re not thinking outside the box, Saaze. Why not just add multiple circuit systems?”

“Multiple... I see, if you can install it in a stable subspace, then you don’t need to worry about circuit capacity. I’m a little worried about whether it’d hold up to the shock waves of multiple Holytree Stone engines, but if the information on this ‘day-tah sheet’ is true, then ten or twenty would be fine.”

“You could even throw in a hundred of them and include both a chain-activating mobile mode and a simultaneously running super-strong defense mode. That’d be interesting.”

“So instead of a fixed Fortress, it’d be a mobile Fortress or a Castle...”

These two weren’t top researchers for nothing. Just the idea of a mobile Fortress or an ultra-defensive Castle mode sounded exciting to me.

“Erm, do you mind if I make a small suggestion?”

Ms. Doa, the head of the magic tool workshop, timidly approached the two high elves.

The other high elf, Ms. Aaze, was sitting in a corner, drinking some grape juice Mr. Gillil had given her and smiling in our direction.

I gave her a little wave, then listened to Doa’s opinion.

“Yes, go ahead.”

“Let us hear your thoughts, Doa of Bolenan.”

“O-of course. I believe the magic circuits on the golden armor are already near the limit of integration. Putting multiples of the same device in the

subspace is one thing, but would it not be difficult to equip the armor itself with the capacity to activate them?”

At that, Keze and Saaze looked at each other.

Even they couldn't come up with a solution for that.

“You got anything?”

“Satou, surely you can come up with something?”

“Let me think...”

It would be impossible to increase the armor's amount of components with my current equipment.

If I could use chants, I'd be able to control Space Magic much more precisely and could probably increase its capacity a hundredfold without a problem, but that wasn't helpful right now. I tried to think of something else.

“If we made some kind of enhanced armament and attached the additional features to that, it might be possible.”

“Enhanced armament?”

“Yes, like a vehicle or an exoskeleton.”

I pictured my group flying through the sky in skimpy armor.

Basically, I was describing the sort of power suits that appeared in the science fiction light novels and anime that were popular when I was in school.

There were some that could even combine into a robot-like moving fort.

“That would increase the capacity, too.”

“And an additional piece of equipment could be traded out, depending on the goal.”

Keze and Saaze immediately understood my suggestion and nodded.

Since they'd been doing research for thousands of years now, it was easy for them to extrapolate from a small amount of information.

“That was a pretty productive session.”

“It's too bad we weren't able to incorporate the Heavenslight Protection from

Lalakie.”

“I think I’ll be able to solve a lot of issues, thanks to all your help.”

Because of the elf engineers Keze, Saaze, and Doa testing things out with me until nearly evening, my prototype was mostly complete.

As an experiment, I tried reducing the golden armor’s circuits a little and changing its color to silver or to red leather armor instead, but those options didn’t seem to have much use aside from spare armor for my companions.

I also tried equipping the armor with “phalanx” circuits that had the disposable version of the Fortress feature, but there were too many issues in the way of completing that version, for the time being.

The one function I was able to successfully implement was a Voice-Changing feature. Technically, it was attached to the neckplate that went on beneath the armor, not to the golden armor itself. I figured it would help disguise the wearer in case they ever had to appear in front of other people in the golden armor.

“One day is far from enough. We need to study this for at least a hundred years.”

That was a typical opinion for a high elf, since their life spans were almost unnecessarily long.

“Humans don’t live long enough for that.”

“Oh, really? Right. I forgot you were a human, Satou.”

That was probably a sign of how thoroughly they accepted me.

“More importantly, let’s have a toast to our successful research results.”

“Good idea. I’ve been wondering where that tempting smell is coming from for a while now.”

“Me too. I haven’t had dragonspring liquor in three hundred years.”

We shared a toast with dragonspring liquor and parted ways, and I went to deliver the oven magic tools and such to the Echigoya Company as Akindoh.

“Now, which should I make first...?”

Once that was done, I headed into a back alley to teleport, murmuring to

myself.

There was the mobile Fortress feature to expand on Nana's armor's Fortress function feature; the enhanced armament with the Castle feature; a floating Fortress for Lulu based on the same principles, or a floating magic support system for Arisa and Mia; offensive armor for the attacker group...a bunch of fantasy-like equipment had been added to my to-do list.

It would be difficult to make them one at a time, so I decided to start with the magic equipment and techniques I'd need for Nana's and Lulu's armor.

If I could finish one or two before the end of the year, that would be perfect—no, if I reduced my sleep to the bare minimum, I could probably squeeze in everything.

Shaking my head at my own workaholic thoughts, I used Return to go back to pick up Liza and the others from their hunt in Muno Barony.



"I don't know how you can eat eyeballs like that..."

Arisa grimaced as she watched the beastfolk girls happily devour the giant eyeball.

"Deliiish...?"

"It's really yummy, sir."

"Yes, it has a mild flavor, smooth yet faintly unctuous mouthfeel, and a thick and savory center with a slight touch of bitterness. When you chew on it, a faint sweetness mingles with..."

Liza's food reportage was getting lengthier by the day.

It goes without saying that this giant eyeball came from the Elder Naga that Liza and the others defeated that afternoon.

By the time I went to get them, they had already finished wiping out the monsters and retrieved the cores from the tens of thousands of monster corpses, and they had even broken down the meat and materials from a few dozen of them, beginning with the Elder Naga.

I used a combination of Magic Hand and Storage to collect all the corpses and

materials, then changed the barricade from the City Core to a general anti-monster barrier and relinquished my control over the City Core.

Aside from whatever the elves wanted, most of the materials we acquired from this monster massacre would probably stay in Storage indefinitely.

The meat was a different matter, though.

Pochi and Tama seemed most excited about the Elder Naga eyeball, which I had Ms. Nea and the other elf chefs prepare right away.

I had them prepare the long-awaited *kanpyou* by simmering the dried gourd strips in a simple base of mirin, soy sauce, and sugar, so the *makizushi* rolls were already good to go.

Sadly, aside from Arisa and me, nobody else seemed particularly impressed with them.

Since I'd made extra, I planned to bring them to the reincarnations who lived in the Lower Stratum of the labyrinth, like Yuika and Ban, next time I was back in that area.

Regardless, I was extremely satisfied to finally eat *makizushi* with *kanpyou* again.

As I was enjoying the *makizushi* with some hot tea, Huit came over with an update.

"Master, the naga *kabayaki* is delicious, I report."

She was holding a soy sauce–broiled skewer in each hand, giving off an incredibly pleased air, despite her expressionless face.

"I agree with Huit, I declare."

"Tria also believes that naga *kabayaki* should be spread throughout the world, I assert."

The other sisters seemed to be enjoying the *kabayaki* just as much as the beastfolk girls.

It seemed like their training with the elf teachers had been pretty intense, but the elves were experienced enough to know how far to push pupils without

going overboard; thus, the homunculi sisters still had enough energy to eat.

The sauce used for the *kabayaki* skewers this time around was an experimental new recipe Lulu and Nea developed, using ant honey from Labyrinth City in place of sugar, and it was surprisingly delicious. This new sauce might be the perfect thing for the Echigoya Company's new food carts.

"So, how'd taking that city back go?"

"Deliciooous..."

"There was lots of meat, sir!"

Ignoring Tama's and Pochi's usual responses, Arisa looked at Liza, who'd finished her share of the eyeball and was reaching for some naga *kabayaki*.

At that, Liza stopped and responded with a glance in my direction.

"There were a few stronger enemies, but overall most of them were weak monsters level 20 and below."

"Oh dear, what about the experience points, then?" Arisa asked me.

"It was more time-efficient than going around to wipe out monster territories, but not much more experience than a single area of the labyrinth."

As I gave my response, I compared Liza's current experience bar to the numbers I'd noted before the undertaking.

"It'd be nice if we could find some better hunting grounds besides the Celivera Labyrinth, huh?"

"Well, there are other labyrinths besides Celivera. Once the kingdom meeting in the royal capital is over, we can check out some labyrinths as part of our sightseeing tour around the world."

As I'd discovered in my tour of the Celivera Labyrinth's Lower Stratum, there were a surprising number of sightseeing spots to be found inside labyrinths.

"Master, we must say farewell for now."

Adin came over to bid me farewell on behalf of the homunculi sisters.

"Do as your teachers say, and be careful not to get hurt, all right?"

With that, we left Bolenan Forest behind.

Of course, we had already said good-bye to Nana's other sisters, Ms. Aaze, and the rest of our friends in Bolenan Forest.

I wished we could have stayed longer, but we had to get back because I'd been invited to a garden party at Count Litton's home that afternoon.

We stopped by Paradise Island on the way back, but only long enough to give Rei and her sister Yuuneia some naga meat, fun magic tools, and other gifts, since we didn't have much time to chat.

I was planning to go back to Bolenan Forest before the end of the year to check on Nana's sisters, at which point we could stick around and catch up a little longer.

Maybe we could stay in Bolenan Forest for more than just a night or two next time, too?

I did want to continue developing new equipment in the underground research lab.

Garden Party

“Satou here. The closest experience I’ve had to attending a garden party is being at a friend’s outdoor wedding. Maybe that’s inevitable, since there aren’t many houses in Japan with a garden big enough to host a party in.”

“I wish I could have sparred with the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, too!”

When we went to pick up Lady Karina from Baron Muno’s royal capital home, she immediately started complaining.

“Don’t be absurd.” Viscount Nina smacked the back of her head. “What you need is training to ensure that you don’t embarrass yourself at social gatherings!”

“I don’t want to go to that silly garden party.”

“Would you rather stay at home in the mansion and study manners, then?”

“Well...” Karina trailed off.

Judging by her expression, that was a choice between a rock and a hard place.

“This is a part of your training, too. You’re here as Satou’s partner for the evening—look alive!”

“I—I know that!”

We had been invited to a garden party at Count Litton’s home. I was planning to go alone, since I didn’t have a partner to bring, but Viscount Nina requested that I bring Lady Karina along instead.

“Well, we mustn’t be late. Shall we get going?”

Since I was an honorary knight, a low-ranking noble class, I was expected to arrive early or it would be considered a breach of manners. This was unless the host asked you to come later, of course.

“This carriage doesn’t have much of a view, does it?”

“Well, I didn’t want your hair to get disheveled.”

Instead of an open-air carriage, I had rented a box-style carriage for nobles today, complete with a coachman.

Karina ignored the footstool that the coachman set out for her and used Raka’s power to jump lightly into the carriage.

She’ll be getting an earful about that from Ms. Nina later, I’m sure.

“What is a garden party like?”

“It’s an event where you talk to others while enjoying light tea and snacks in a garden. I’ve heard there will be performances from an orchestra, jesters, and other entertainers, too.”

According to what I heard from the viceroy’s wife in Labyrinth City Celivera, the fancier garden parties had a stage set up and sometimes invited famous acting troupes to perform.

“I suppose that does sound like fun.”

“Yes, very much so.”

I smiled warmly at Karina, who still looked a little pouty.

The host of the party, Count Litton’s wife Ema, adored anything flashy or fun, according to her good friend the viceroy’s wife. I was somewhat looking forward to meeting her.

Our carriage proceeded at a slow pace down a street full of lesser nobles’ houses. Once we were out on the main street, its pace quickened, and soon we were in the upper nobles’ area.

“The mansions here are all so enormous.”

“Most of them belong to noble families who have been here since the founding of the kingdom, so they’re large even for upper nobles.”

They really were incredibly big. I wasn’t sure why, but feudal lords’ manors seemed to be relatively far away from the castle, despite being in the same area.

The former Marquis Muno mansion that Baron Muno was planning to move into was in this area, too.

“Looks like we’ve arrived at the mansion.”

The carriage arrived at the gate, which was wide enough for two lanes.

As soon as the coachman gave my family name, we were allowed to pass through without any need to show my letter of invitation. The gatekeeper was holding what looked like a guest list, which must have been how he knew to let us in.

Instead of the rotary area right in front of the entrance, we were directed to a parking area slightly farther away. The former was probably for the highest-ranking nobles.

Sure enough, the other people near our parking area all looked like lesser nobles like me, merchants and working people. They were all carrying letters of invitation, too.

I left my gifts for Count Litton and his wife with a butler waiting by the entrance and escorted Lady Karina toward the garden party. She nearly tripped and kicked me a few times, out of sheer nerves, but I didn’t complain, out of appreciation for the pleasant sensation against my arm.

“Why, I don’t believe we’ve been acquainted, youngsters.”

Once we entered the garden area, a merchant approached us. For some reason, his face was hidden under a hood and veil.

“Hmph. Greeting the likes of a newly minted honorary knight? The Sahbe Company stoops so low.”

“Sheh-eh-eh, unlike the Ghookuts Company of the royal capital, we lowly demi-humans live and die by networking.”

The rude wealthier merchant snorted unpleasantly and walked away with his entourage.

The rest of the merchants all gave me appraising glances as well, then quickly lost interest and headed toward the party.

“Apologies. My colleagues are terribly impolite. I am Homimudory of the

weaselfolk Sahbe clan, president of the Sahbe Company.”

A weaselman?

Sure enough, my AR indicated his race as **weaselfolk**.

I hadn’t noticed because his speech was so fluent.

Usually, beastfolk whose vocal cords were built differently struggled with the pronunciations of human speech, but evidently it was possible to fix that with enough practice.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I am Satou Pendragon, hereditary knight and vassal of Muno Barony. This is Karina Muno, daughter of my employer’s house.”

“Pendragon? Could you be His Excellency Sir Pendragon, the one who became a mithril knight?”

“I’m hardly of any rank worth calling ‘Excellency,’ but yes, that would be me.”

“No, no, if you are a liquor marquis of the Kingdom of Sorcery, Lalagi, then you are most certainly qualified to be called His Excellency.”

This weaselfolk merchant seemed to excel at information gathering.

“Our Sahbe Company imports rare products from the Weaselman Empire, so please do come and visit us sometime. Since marionette cores were considered contraband until recently, we are full up on reservations for them, but we do have many a rare item from the Illusion Labyrinth of Dejima Island.”

Dejima... That was the name of a man-made island that used to exist in Nagasaki.

Was it named by a Japanese person who reincarnated in the Weaselman Empire, perhaps?

“Aside from the scrolls we submitted through the Celivera explorers’ guild the other day, we’ve also acquired a few new scrolls recently...”

Ohh, now I remember.

This must be the merchant who sold me scrolls like Mowing and Cherry Blossom Shower by way of the explorers’ guild.

If I remembered right, the guild had mentioned that he had two other scrolls

he wanted to sell me.

“That’s exciting to hear. I’ll be sure to pay you a visit soon.”

Then I asked about some of the intriguing phrases he’d mentioned, like marionette cores and Illusion Labyrinth.

“Marionette cores are an incredibly rare item that occasionally appear in the Illusion Labyrinth. They’re used to make golems in the style of magic tools.”

From the rest of his explanation, it sounded like they were similar to the core parts the elves used to make golems.

As it turns out, construct-like monsters such as living armor and golems frequently appeared in the Illusion Labyrinth. Entering the labyrinth required an immigration check and permission forms, which could take as long as two or three years to acquire.

I learned in this conversation that the Weaselman Empire was closed to foreigners, like Japan in the Edo period had been. Dejima Island was the only part that was accessible as a trade area. The weaselfolk found in the Shiga Kingdom were generally either children of people who had left the empire before it closed its borders or merchants operating out of Dejima Island.

“Please forgive my interruption. Mr. Homimudory, would you be so kind as to introduce the rest of us to this young nobleman as well?”

A merchant from the western part of the continent set off a chain of other interactions, and I was able to meet merchants from the small countries to the east, the center of the continent, and from other areas. Most of them were human, but there were a few fairies, beastfolk, and scalefolk, too.

Each of them told me about their local specialties and scenic areas, while I took notes for future sightseeing visits.



“Satou.”

A tug on my sleeve reminded me of Lady Karina’s presence.

Turning, I saw a slightly sulky look on her pretty face.

No matter how interesting the conversations might have been, I was a failure

of a gentleman for forgetting about my escort so easily.

“I’m sorry, Lady Karina.”

“...Well, I’m quite thirsty.”

Karina turned away with a cute little harrumph, and I excused myself from my new merchant friends to accompany her over to the tables with drinks and light snacks.

“Everything looks delicious.”

I picked out some food, greeting other lesser nobles along the way with a nod.

It would be rude to try to talk to them while they were eating; I would talk to them properly later.

“It most certainly is tasty. You should eat some, too, Satou.”

At Karina’s prompting, I brought the food to my mouth.

The light refreshments, like canapés and sandwiches, didn’t look much different from the dishes in Japan. There wasn’t anything with mayonnaise, but otherwise it was delicious.

As I enjoyed the hors d’oeuvres with various toppings, I noticed that the expressions of the people around me had turned anxious.

“So you vulgar country bumpkins eat with your hands?”

Some young noblemen and noblewomen with fancy outfits and haughty expressions had approached Karina and me. If Arisa were here, she’d probably be bellowing, “Here come the clichés!”

For a moment, I was worried that I really was supposed to be eating with a knife and fork, but then I noticed that there were finger bowls all around us. Besides, if eating with cutlery really was the norm, I imagine the butlers keeping an eye on everything would’ve brought some over immediately.

Noticing that the shy Karina was shrinking a little from the rude, sneering nobles, I shifted my position to shield her from their view.

“They don’t have any knives and forks out in the country.”

“No waaay, really?”

“Surely they can’t be *that* uncultured.”

“Hey, we don’t know that.”

The rude noble’s posse snickered behind him.

I could tell from their attitudes that they were the cowardly types who came up with false pretenses to pick on newcomers.

The kids who used to pick on classmates in middle school acted just like this.

“What’s wrong? You scared ’cause we’re so right?”

His pride obviously inflated, the ringleader noble jeered at us, trying to incite rage or fear.

I wasn’t looking to get into a fistfight here, but I didn’t want these idiots to upset Karina or make her social anxiety even worse.

Just to be safe, I checked their stats to make sure I could theoretically deal with them by way of my personal connections.

“No, not at all.”

As I responded with a smile, I activated my “Intimidation” skill just a little.

In order to make sure nobody had a heart attack, I kept it to a low level that would render demi-goblins too frightened to move.

“Um, wait a sec...”

“This guy’s trouble.”

The rude young nobles all looked frightened. It had worked perfectly, then.

“W-we’ll let you off easy this one time.”

The noble put on a bold face even as he backed away.

Normally I would’ve left it at that, but there was a nasty gleam in the ringleader’s eye that suggested he was going to try to get revenge, so I decided to take action instead. If I didn’t nip this in the bud, he might start spreading rumors about me or following me around.



“Since you were so kind as to point out my blunder, perhaps you could specify exactly what I did that was so vulgar?”

I used “Blink” to get up close in front of them.

“G-get away!”

The rude noble swung the cane in his hand to try to hit me in the side of the head.

What a Neanderthal.

It would’ve been easy to dodge, but because I wanted to make sure everyone saw that he was the one who had gotten violent first, I let the cane hit me.

Of course, I’m not a masochist by nature—I used “Magic Power Armor” next to my head just long enough to block it from hitting me directly.

I also used the “Iron Skin” skill to root myself in place.

> Skill Acquired: “Immovable Body”

> Skill Acquired: “Indestructible Body”

Somehow, this netted me a few skills.

The “Indestructible Body” skill was somehow different from the “Defense Shell” I had gotten before.

At any rate, the cane went flying from the noble’s hand after it struck my head, and he grabbed his arm and yelped in pain.

Since my body had suddenly become hard and heavy, the force he put into hitting me must have recoiled back on him.

I guess it must be like when a cartoon character tries to hit something soft that turns out to be hard as rock.

As he stared at me in disbelief, there was still a foreboding glint in his eye.

This isn’t really my style, but I figured I had better break him a little more.

“Is something the matter?”

I raised the intensity of my “Intimidation” skill just a little, and the rude young nobleman fell back in alarm.

“Now, would you mind explaining what I did wrong, please?”

This time I used my “Interrogation” skill, too.

“...ing!”

“I’m sorry, I can’t hear you. Could I trouble you to speak up a little?”

“W-we were just messing with you! Normally bumpkins who don’t belong in the royal capital freak out and apologize when we say that. It’s just for fun!”

Just like that, because of my “Interrogation” skill, he confessed that it was just an excuse to harass us.

A few of the nobles in the crowd watching us must have been fellow victims—murderous gazes landed on the rude noble after his confession.

I didn’t want this to turn into a big deal, so I figured I should let them off the hook and wrap things up.

“I see. Being a country bumpkin myself, I was afraid I had done something to offend you refined royal capital folk.”

I turned off my “Intimidation” skill and smiled at them.

All that was left was to shake hands and part on what I hoped were friendly terms—but no, of course it couldn’t be that simple.

“In other words, you took it upon yourselves to tease Lady Karina, the honorable daughter of a feudal lord, in spite of the fact that she had done nothing wrong.”

A pretty young girl stepped into the fray.

Flipping her distinctive pink hair over her shoulder, she shot me a playful look.

“P-Princess Menea!” the rude noble exclaimed.

“Good to see you again, Sir Satou.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Princess Menea.”

“How many times must I tell you to simply call me Menea?”

“You know these bumpkins, Princess?”

Ignoring the shocked nobleman completely, she turned to give Karina a hug.

“It’s so lovely to see you, Lady Karina.” They’d been good friends in the old capital, and Karina looked relieved to have another ally, too.

“T-they’re friends of the princess?”

“That dull-looking guy?”

The rude noble’s entourage murmured in shock.

I didn’t really care what they said about me, though.

“Word of the Pendragon party’s accomplishments has reached the royal capital, you know.” Menea spoke loud enough for everyone to hear. “I hear you defeated a floormaster and became mithril explorers, did you not?”

“A mithril explorer?”

“P-Pendragon...like ‘the Untouchable’?”

“Wasn’t the maid who defeated the Plunderer King one of Pendragon’s servants?”

“I heard he faced off with a demon.”

Now everyone was looking this way and muttering among themselves.

“Although...” Once she had everyone talking, Princess Menea continued. “Perhaps that was an easy feat for the knight who joined forces with the hero and drove off the dragon that was tormenting Lumork Kingdom.”

By the time she finished speaking, all eyes were on the princess.

She might have the makings of a gifted actress.

“He drove off a dragon?”

“Wait, he knows the hero?”

“Wow, I didn’t know you were friends with a hero, Satou.”

...Huh?

I turned around and saw a familiar face.

“L-Lady Helmina!”

“He knows a member of the Shiga Eight, too?!”

“And they seem so friendly!”

Upon her arrival, the rude noble and his entourage all exclaimed in surprise.

Though her usual Holy Knight’s armor suited her well, the elegant white and pale blue dress she was wearing for the party looked great on her, too. It drew out her beauty and coolness in perfect harmony, emphasizing her charms even more than usual.

I made a note of the creator of the dress with my AR display.

“If we’re talking about Satou’s achievements, how about the time he and I fought some lesser and intermediate demons together?”

Usually Lady Helmina called me “Sir Pendragon,” but now she was calling me “Satou” instead. I’m guessing she was making a point of showing that we were close friends, to scare off the would-be bullies.

“An intermediate demon?”

“Like the one that nearly destroyed Lessau County’s capital?”

“I’m amazed they survived.”

The center of attention was now on Lady Helmina.

“It was impressive, all right,” Lady Helmina said proudly. “He went and challenged that intermediate demon with nothing but a single sword, not even wearing armor.”

For some reason, Lady Karina and Princess Menea looked irritated.

“Lady Helmina, is that true?” the rude noble asked.

“Hmm, who’re you again? But yes, it’s true. If you’re going to pick a fight with Satou, you better have an army or two at the ready.”

“A-an army?!”

Helmina’s exaggerated claims made the nobleman turn pale.

“That’s right. I’m telling you this for your own good: Unless you have seasoned warriors at your disposal who can at least take on an intermediate demon, you’d better not make an enemy of Satou.” She smiled unpleasantly and stuck a finger in his face. “Not to mention, Satou doesn’t care about wealth

or social status. If he wanted to destroy you, he'd squash you like a bug without caring what it did to his reputation."

"Th-that's ridiculous..."

"Perhaps, but it's true. He even went head-to-head with Sir Gouen in a bout with real swords and ended it in a draw."

"Sir Gouen of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen...?" The rude noble looked at me with tears in his eyes. "I—I'm sorry, Sir Pindragon."

It seemed he hadn't fully learned my name yet.

"P-please let me apolo—"

"There's no need to apologize to me."

The rude noble stared at me desperately.

I stepped aside to reveal Lady Karina, who was hiding behind me. "If you're going to apologize to anyone, apologize to her," I said.

"E-erm... I'm sorry for upsetting you, miss. I, Moushil Bonam, offer my sincerest apologies."

He didn't seem to remember Lady Karina's name, either.

The name "Bonam" sounded familiar, though... Oh, right. It was the family name of the acting Viceroy Sokell, who fell from grace when I discovered that he was producing demonic potion in Labyrinth City. Let's hope this guy wasn't too close with Sokell.

"I—I accept your apowogy."

"Th-thank you for your kindness."

With those reluctant words, the rude noble and his friends quickly made their escape.

Lady Karina was so overwhelmed by all the people watching her that she had fumbled that last word, but it didn't seem like the rude noble noticed, and the remaining nobles in the area were all looking at her favorably.

A few young ladies looked a little afraid of me after everything Lady Helmina had said, but I hoped they would soon realize that I didn't mean any harm.

“Princess Menea, would you tell me more about Satou’s exploits in the old capital?”

“Anything you wish, Ms. Helmina. Come, join us, Lady Karina. I’d like to hear what Sir Satou has been up to in Labyrinth City.”

Princess Menea and Lady Helmina led Lady Karina away to chat in a little arbor area surrounded by hedges.

She looked back at me like a calf being led to slaughter, but I thought it was for the best that she talk to girls around her age once in a while.

Surely the sociable Princess Menea would lend her a hand.

“Sir Pendragon, it’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is...”

As a young lesser noble introduced himself to me, I decided to take that chance to make some social connections.

Once I exchanged names (not business cards) with a few other nobles, we started getting to know one another by way of trading rumors.

“Sir Pendragon, did you hear about the airship incident the other day?”

“Yes, a little...”

One young nobleman shifted the topic to the airship.

“Duke Vistall is in serious trouble for that. No matter how much power he might have, he won’t get off easy after being responsible for bringing down the first large airship the royal family has made in twenty years.”

“It almost crashed into the royal capital, didn’t it?”

“I believe it was an emergency landing, not a crash,” I corrected politely.

“Really? But I heard from a friend of a friend that nearly all the skypower engines and propellers were destroyed.”

That was true, but the fins that were the most important part of the engines were mostly salvageable, so I wouldn’t call it a total loss. I couldn’t say that here, though, of course.

“But it was the pilots who messed up the airship, right? Why would Duke Vistall be held responsible when he was just a passenger?”

“That’s the thing!” The young man who had brought up the topic exclaimed loudly, then lowered his voice and continued. “From what I heard, it was Duke Vistall’s own son who tried to assassinate him.”

“By bringing down the whole airship?”

“He’s the duke of a major territory. You can’t kill him by any ordinary means.”

“I guess that’s true...”

Information about City Cores was top secret, but it seemed to be common knowledge that all feudal lords had exceptional power of some kind.

“Hydra poison or a gorgon’s curse could probably do it, but if it didn’t work right away, you would get branded a traitor and your whole family executed or turned into slaves on the spot.”

I don’t think it’s that all-powerful...

Maybe the lords themselves had spread such exaggerated rumors to discourage any traitors or attempted assassinations.

“But why would he try to kill his own father? If he just waits long enough, the territory would end up in his hands eventually.”

“This is just a rumor, but I heard his son Torriel was getting disinherited.”

That was true. This nobleman seemed to have some good sources.

“Disinherited? That’s unusual.”

“Do you happen to know why this Sir Torriel would get disinherited?” I asked, a little curious.

“Hmm, I’m not sure. Did he mess up in the city where he was appointed viceroy?”

“I thought it was because he failed to stamp out a tribe of savages living on the border that wound up causing serious damage to a settlement in the duchy?”

They didn’t seem to have any solid inside info about that part.

“You mean beastfolk? That’d make sense. Sir Torriel’s always been prejudiced against beastfolk.”

Hmm? That doesn't sound quite right.

But I couldn't quite put my finger on why that seemed wrong.

"Still, I can't believe Sir Torriel of the Impossible Pair is getting disowned. Back in his royal academy days, he and the Witch of Heavenly Destruction, Lady Ringrande, were considered unrivaled prodigies...what a waste."

Now, there was a name I hadn't heard in a while.

"Really?!"

"That was only until around when Lady Ringrande created the Fire Swallow Rod, though. After Sir Torriel graduated, Lady Ringrande brought back the lost arts of 'Explosion Magic: Demon' and 'Destruction Magic: Demon,' and the rest was history."

"Not to mention that she defeated a floormaster with the Holy Knights in the Celivera Labyrinth, and now she's working with a hero, saving the world."

"While they were in school, Sir Torriel and Lady Ringrande both studied the sword under Sir Gouen, but Sir Torriel never had the same level of talent."

"Sir Gouen? From the Shiga Eight?"

"At the time he was Sir Torriel's guardian knight."

I learned that he'd been scouted into the Shiga Eight Swordsmen after Sir Torriel graduated.

The sight of Sir Gouen's troubled face flashed across my mind.

I wonder if he's all right...

He seemed like a good-natured guy; maybe he was feeling torn between his loyalty to Duke Vistall and his former pupil, Sir Torriel.

I decided I should invite him out for a drink soon and hear his troubles. He might have an easier time complaining to a neutral third party like me.

"But it seems like feudal lords have been having a hard time lately, huh?"

"You mean like Lessau County, the territory that got messed up by a demon?"

"That's more than just a hard time; it's life-or-death. One of their two main

cities got destroyed, and a lot of villages were attacked by monsters that the demons brought, too.”

“A cousin of mine who’s a soldier said they’re having a lot of trouble with all the refugees from Lessau County.”

I had been to Lessau County only once before; it seemed to be in dire straits.

Even if it was the fault of the previous feudal lord, I couldn’t bring myself to support Lessau County, given what had happened to Tifaleeza and Neru there.

Their citizens seemed to be suffering, too, though. Depending on the nature of their new lord, I would certainly consider offering them some funding.

“The poor youngster who’s going to be the next count has his work cut out for him with a place like that.”

“I heard his engagement to the princess fell through, too.”

“Really? ...Well, at least he’s off the hook for marrying a woman past her prime,” snorted a middle-aged noble whose face was red from the wine in his hand.

“Hey, watch your mouth. Even if you’re the Master of Forbidden Tomes, you can’t talk about a direct descendant of the ancestral king like that!”

It was strange to me that the ancestral king had anything to do with that being a rude thing to say, but it seemed to be a serious offense. The man’s face turned from bright red to pale white, and he pleaded with the others, “Please, I beg you to forget you heard such a thoughtless remark.”

“Honestly...do you want to get banished to the Azure Lands or what?” Someone who seemed to be a friend of the red-faced noble dragged him away. “Let’s get you sobered up.”

“The Azure Lands?”

“It’s a penal colony to the southwest of the royal capital.”

From Labyrinth City Celivera, it appeared to be south-southwest, or southeast of the great desert. I vaguely remembered hearing the name mentioned in a discussion of the plunderers’ punishment.

If I remembered right, it was a monster territory where the rate of slave casualties was extremely high.

One nobleman cleared his throat very loudly, then blatantly changed the subject.

“Err, ahem. Have you heard the rumor of the monster that appears in the slums night after night, devouring the residents?”

“A monster in the royal capital? When it’s protected by such a strong barrier?”

“You don’t mean the undead that appear in graveyards and haunted houses?”

Wait, the undead can show up in the city?

“You all seem to be a bit behind the times.”

“Seriously. You don’t know about the huge incident that took place on Main Street?”

Two of the nobles started smugly referring to the demon incident that was caused by the demon lord-worshipping group, the ones that Sir Gouen and I had fought and defeated.

“I—I know all about that.”

“Yes, this is a different incident.”

The first noble seemed to be bluffing, but the one who’d originally brought up this topic insisted that he was referring to something else.

“But it’s probably just those sketchy demon lord worshippers causing trouble in the slums.”

“That could be,” I agreed vaguely, checking the map just in case.

Aside from golems or familiars that had been tamed by monster tamers, there were no monsters aboveground in the royal capital.

There were some lesser undead roaming in the sewers underground, but they seemed to be servants of a necromancer whose base was in the sewers.

That certainly sounded like a low-level villain from a game or manga, but since the necromancer and the undead didn’t have any offenses in their Bounty

column, there was probably no need to go crush them.

Still, I marked the necromancer on my map just in case.

“That’s possible, since no one has seen the monster and lived, but...”

“So there aren’t any eyewitnesses?”

“No, but there have definitely been incidents. My cousin who’s a soldier says that they’ve found several bodies in the slums that seem to have been eaten by monsters.”

Hmm. The undead in the sewers were all skeletons, so the necromancer probably wasn’t involved in this.

“If it isn’t some weird monster the demon lord worshippers summoned, it’s probably just a wild dog or a wolf, yeah?”

“Most likely. I heard the hero already wiped out all the demon lord worshippers, and even if some random monster really had managed to get into the royal capital, there’s the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony at the end of the year. Any monster would turn tail and run at that.”

My curiosity piqued, I asked a few questions about this “Evil-Cleansing Ceremony.”

They explained that it was a Ritual Magic cast every six months using Holy Chalice or Holy Grails, which had the effect of chasing away any monsters in or near the royal capital.

This time around, they were doing a larger version that was carried out every six years, which used the royal family’s Holy Chalice and Holy Grails from various dukes.

The Holy Chalice that Duke Vistall’s youngest daughter, Somienna, carried must have been brought here for that ceremony, then.

“Is it possible to observe the ceremony?”

“Aside from the shrine maidens from six temples and higher-ranking priests and priestesses, it’s generally only attended by the royal family, feudal lords, and the heads of high-ranking noble families.”

That's too bad—wait, if I ask Baron Muno, he might let me attend as part of his retinue. I should ask when I get back.

“Forget that! The best part of the end of the year is obviously the auction!”

“I heard there's tons of great treasures this year.”

“Right, since Sir Pendragon and Sir Mossad defeated those floormasters and all.”

“There's a rumor there'll be a marionette core for sale, too.”

Oh-ho? Now that's intriguing.

Depending on the price, I might have to bid on that. I was curious to research what made elf-style golems different, too.

It might be a bad look for Satou to place the winning bid. I decided to ask Eluterina from the Echigoya Company to do it in my stead.



“Everyone, the performance is starting soon.”

As we were caught up in conversation, one of the lesser nobles pointed toward a crowd.

Sure enough, music was starting to play in the garden, and the number of high-class-looking nobles had increased.

Jesters and minstrels were wandering about the area as well, performing for the guests. There was even an area with games that looked similar to darts and ring toss, and a sport that seemed like a cross between croquet and bowling.

“Looks like the Laxton Orchestra is performing.”

“Wow, normally it takes at least two months to get tickets to their concerts, but they hired them for a party...”

“No wonder garden parties at the house of Count Litton are so famous.”

“There's going to be a solo performance by a famed musician later today, too.”

“That certainly sounds exciting.”

We chatted as we walked toward the stage that had been built in the garden.

Since the seats were already full, I stood in the back with the other lesser nobles to listen to the performance.

I don't have a very good sense of rhythm, but their performance was so incredible that even I could tell it was special. Even in the outdoors without the acoustics of a concert hall, they rivaled the performance of the orchestra that played with Cyriltoa the Songstress in the old capital.

Finally, the song moved into a solo part.

Wow.

The soloist was so incredible that it was hard to believe the same performer had been buried among the rest of the orchestra all that time.

He must have been prioritizing the harmony of the group until the solo section.

The solo was so expressive that magnificent scenery seemed to fill my mind when I closed my eyes and listened to the music.

When the solo finally ended, I let out a small sigh, and there was thunderous applause as the concert came to a close.

"That was quite a performance."

"Yes, it feels like my heart and mind have been cleansed."

The other nobles beside us were all having similar conversations.

Just as we were all bathing in the echoes of the incredible performance, a harsh voice suddenly grated on our ears.

"Duel me, Sir Pendragon!"

The rude noble was back with his posse, holding an expensive-looking instrument in one hand.

Someone must have told him how to pronounce my name correctly.

"Duel you...?"

"I'll show you the skills of a musician who once studied under the famed

Kestra.”

He seemed very confident of his musical talent.

Lady Helmina’s words must have convinced him that he was no match for me in a fight, so he must have chosen to challenge me to an artistic face-off instead.

“Hmm? When did you ever study under me?”

A refined male voice came from across the crowd.

It was the musician who’d just performed that solo part.

“Sir Kestra! Please, right this way!”

The rude noble beckoned the gentleman over and looked at me triumphantly.

“Oh? You’re the boy I met at the fountain the other day.”

The musician was looking right at me.

“Whoa, the famous Kestra talked to him!”

“Who is that black-haired boy?”

The other nobles all started whispering about me.

“I greatly enjoyed our little session that day. It was a splendid performance.”

Ohhh, now I remember.

It was the gentleman who played music with Mia during our royal capital sightseeing.

“Thank you...”

I was about to say that I would pass his words on to Mia, but he interrupted, looking around.

“Is that little lady not here with you today?”

“No, she’s a bit too small for that.”

“I see. Please, come by and visit at the concert hall sometime.”

The gentleman produced a ticket from his breast pocket, wrote something on the back, and handed it to me.

“That’s a ticket to see the Laxton Orchestra!”

“And it’s for the special VIP seats, too.”

“Even high-ranking nobles have a hard time getting their hands on those...”

The well-informed nobles gazed at me enviously, and the other nobles started murmuring as well.

“If you show them this, they’ll let you come backstage.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll be sure to bring her for a visit.”

The gentleman nodded in satisfaction at my response.

“Master Kestra! What sort of relationship do you have with Pendragon?!”

The rude noble who’d been left out of this exchange pressed toward the gentleman.

“Ah, you’re Count Bonam’s son... Young man.”

The gentleman didn’t seem to remember the rude noble’s first name.

“What sort of relationship?” He glanced at me. “I happened to run into him while out on a stroll. We were able to have a lovely little concert.”

The gentleman smiled warmly, sending another wave of chatter through the crowd of nobles.

“H-he’s good enough that even Master acknowledges him...?”

“I beg your pardon, young man. But I must ask that you please stop calling me ‘Master.’ That title is reserved for my pupils.”

“B-but you taught music at our home—”

“At Count Bonam’s invitation, I did come to the main house at the time and lend an ear and a few words of advice to your performance, but I’ve paid such visits to many a home.”

The gentleman curtly shut down the rude noble’s desperate grasping.

He seemed like a gentle fellow, but clearly he was strict when it came to the arts.

“Now then, I have another performance today, so I shall go give my regards to

Lady Ema and be on my way.”

With a short glance at the trembling nobleman, the gentleman gave me a cheerful smile and strolled away.

The other nobles in the area watched him leave, then turned back to look at the rude noble and me.

I wished I could walk away, too, but if I left things like this, the rude noble might fly off the handle completely.

“So, about that musical duel...”

“Don’t get too full of yourself, Pendragon!”

I tried to clear the air, but the rude noble practically growled at me and ran off with that parting line.

I was planning to lose miserably in the musical matchup and let him satisfy his thirst for revenge... Unfortunately, I guess it wound up rubbing salt in his wound instead.



“Please pardon my intrusion.”

I was in the middle of trying to resolve the misunderstandings about the musician situation and slow down the rumors that were spreading among the nobles when a graceful maid approached me.

“You are Sir Pendragon, I believe? Lady Litton was asking after you.”

I excused myself from the group of nobles and followed the maid to see Lady Ema Litton, the count’s wife and host of the party.

She was sitting at a table in the center of the spacious garden, surrounded by noblewomen in equally extravagant dresses. According to my AR display, they were all the wives of upper-class nobles like Lady Litton.

Near the table was an enormous pile of gifts from guests. Mine were among them, still unopened. I hoped she would get to them soon: They included some freshly made sweets.

“So you’re Reythel’s new favorite, hmm?”

Lady Litton was a refined, feminine beauty, with lovely youthful features that belied the fact that she was around forty years old.

The “Reythel” she mentioned was the first name of the viceroy’s wife in Labyrinth City.

According to her, Lady Litton had a great deal of influence in the royal capital’s social sphere, so I had best be careful to stay on her good side.

Still seated, she gave me a long, appraising stare, then reached out one white-gloved hand.

“My name is Satou Pendragon, honorary knight and vassal of Muno Barony. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

I introduced myself using the traditional phrase I was taught in my course on noble manners. Then I kissed her outstretched hand lightly enough that I barely grazed the white glove.

I had never done this outside of my lessons on manners, but now I was glad that I’d memorized it.

“Oh, my. Here I was expecting a rather uncouth explorer type, but I see your manners are impeccable.” Her judgmental look softened, evidently impressed with my display. “I hear you rescued our Bowman in Labyrinth City. Please allow me to thank you. If you should ever run into trouble in the capital city, I’ll be happy to help you out just once.”

“It was hardly anything worth noting, but I sincerely appreciate your kind words.”

Between the rude noble from before and those delinquent nobles at the museum, the royal capital seemed to have a problem with nobles who had overinflated egos. Having a helping hand from someone with a lot of influence in the royal capital was certainly reassuring.

“That being said, I wasn’t aware that young Master Bowman had any connection to the Litton family.”

“We’re not related by blood. He’s the son of a close friend of mine. I would’ve hated to see her cry... Thanking you is the least I can do.” After that, she

murmured, “Besides, Reythel wouldn’t be able to help publically because of her faction.”

Ah, so it’s that sort of relationship.

Now I more or less understood why she hadn’t been able to go crying to her friend the viceroy’s wife for help, and why he and Gerits were so close.

“Sir Pendragon, do you have a moment?”

While I was mulling all this over, Lady Litton requested a look at my sleeves—specifically the cuff links attached to them. I held out my arm accordingly.

“So Ema’s new boy toy has black hair?”

A beautiful, sultry woman, evidently a friend of Lady Litton, cast me a strangely syrupy look.

“Why, this is a rune light gem from the Echigoya Company,” the woman declared as she looked at my cuff link.

“Not quite,” Lady Litton responded with a pointed smile, then continued. “It’s not a rune engraved in the light stone, but Sir Pendragon’s family crest. And this exterior is a processed gemstone, not colored glass, is that right?”

“Surely not... I can’t imagine anyone but the legendary jewel magic master Gemma creating such a thing.”

“But the only way to inscribe one’s crest into a light stone and place it within a transparent gem would be to use Earth Magic, correct?”

“That’s right.” I nodded.

The sultry beauty continued gazing at me, cranking up the sweetness in her syrupy expression.

“I don’t suppose you’d tell me how you did it?”

It would be easy to give her Akindoh’s name, but it would be a hassle if they tried to dig up more information on him. Instead I just used the classic Japanese technique of smiling vaguely.

Lady Litton chuckled. “Rayuna, looks like there are some men who can resist you after all.”

“That’s not it, Ema. He’s not so stricken by my charms that the poor thing can’t speak. But let’s see... Would you be willing to procure one for me, then?”

“It would take some time, as the jeweler who made this one lives in a somewhat distant country, but if that’s all right with you I’d be happy to pass your request along. It’s a very difficult process, though, so he can only make so many...”

I decided to make up a reason to limit the number of requests so I wouldn’t be flooded with custom orders.

“Yes, of course. Right, Ema?”

“Agreed. Let’s keep this as our little secret.”

“Well then, how much would it cost?”

I used my “Estimation” skill on my own cuff links to check.

They had only been five gold coins this morning, yet now that all these upper nobles were eyeing them, the price had jumped to nearly three times that of a similarly sized Heaven’s Teardrop. I guess noblewomen really love shiny things like these.

“I believe it depends on the size of the gemstone. Other designs besides family crests are also possible, but the jeweler said he would need a sample carving of the design as reference.”

I gave the “Estimation” price for one around the size of my cuff links; then I added about 20 percent more than that for one the size of the brooches and pendants the women were wearing.

“Oh my, that’s not as much as I expected.”

“But surely that doesn’t account for your finder’s fee, Sir Pendragon? You simply must include more than the commission money from the merchant.”

The syrupy beauty’s eyes widened while Lady Litton scolded me.

She said that anywhere from 5 to 30 percent was standard for a finder’s fee.

Thanking her for her kindness, I raised the price by 5 percent, as she suggested, and took down their orders.

Oh, I know...

"I apologize for bringing this up right after taking your order, but..." I said, and I asked if they wouldn't mind opening the presents I'd brought.

"Well, well, what have we here?"

Lady Litton had one of her attendants fetch my gifts, then opened them herself and looked inside.

"Good heavens! Isn't this something?"

She exclaimed in surprise as she took out a pendant with a sizable Heaven's Teardrop.

"Sir Rayleigh once told me that a Heaven's Teardrop would be the ideal present for you, so I asked a merchant friend of mine to sell me the best he had to offer."

I'd had an artisan elf make this for me when we visited Bolenan Forest, since the viceroy's son, Rayleigh, had mentioned this to me a while ago.

Despite being teardrop-shaped, as its name suggested, this mysterious gemstone sparkled and reflected light as brightly as a brilliant-cut diamond. And although it was called a gemstone, it wasn't found in mines; it was made from the sap of a tree that only grew in areas rich with spirits, and no ordinary humans knew how to make them.

Those trees were quite common in Bolenan Forest, where they used the material to make durable tableware and decorations.

"Why, it's remarkable! The transparency is even higher than the Heaven's Teardrop Sir Rayleigh brought me straight from the Kingdom of Ishrallie!"

"It could almost be the Fairy's Teardrop from the legends."

Noticing the woman's syrupy eyes back on me, I quickly informed her that this was a rare commodity the merchant had happened to find, not something I could likely reorder.

"I hope Reythel won't be cross with me for keeping such a lovely gem to myself."

“She isn’t the sort of person who would get angry over such a thing.”

Besides, I still had two more of these that the alua artisan had made for me, and I was already planning to give one to the viceroy’s wife.

I had been thinking of having Lady Karina wear the last one for her societal debut, but after seeing the reaction it got from Lady Litton and the others, it was probably best to hold off on that. It would defeat the purpose if it made Karina the target of jealousy.

“Goodness, it really is lovely. Sir Pendragon, I’ll be calling you Satou from now on. Is that all right?”

“I would be honored, Mrs. Litton.”

“I’ll let you call me Ema.”

“Thank you very much, Lady Ema.”

The other women around her tittered in surprise; evidently it was rare for her to let people use her first name. I’d been bracing myself since the viceroy’s wife told me that Lady Litton liked teasing people, but maybe I was worried for nothing.

Now that we had gotten to know each other a bit, I also suggested that they try the fresh sweets that I’d presented her along with the pendant.

“This is a bit different from the *castella* Reythel was boasting about in her letter, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s called a roll cake.”

“Well, it’s simply scrumptious.”

“Ema! This one has strawberries inside.”

The syrupy beauty squealed like a young girl.

I guess good food can bring people back to their younger days.

While we enjoyed the snacks with tea, I asked the ladies to tell me about famous makeup studios, sewing workshops, and similar boutique niches in the royal capital, as well as their favorite accessory shops, famous designers, and other such things.

They even gave me letters of introduction. I planned to bring my group and Lady Karina along to those places in the near future.



“There you are, bumpkin noble! Let’s settle this!”

Once I excused myself from Lady Litton and company and went back to the area where the other nobles were gathered, the rude noble came after me yet again.

He stood in front of me looking smug, with his retinue behind him.

All of them had mithril rapiers, gaudily decorated Magic Swords, and other such weapons at their hips.

There was even one Holy Knight with a yellow spear—it was Jagou, the one who’d picked a fight with Liza and me back at the Holy Knights’ headquarters.

“P-Pendragon?”

“Well, this is quite a coincidence.”

The rude noble must have called him in as backup, although he seemed to have neglected to tell the knight who he’d be confronting.

“Come on, Sir Jagou! Show this upstart country bumpkin the true strength of the royal capital’s proud Holy Knights!”

“R-right...”

While the rude noble looked triumphant, Sir Jagou looked rather pale.

“Sir Jagou here is a top candidate for the Shiga Eight Swordsmen! He’s on a par with the mighty warriors who can even defeat intermediate demons!”

I guess he must have gone looking for “seasoned warriors who can at least take on an intermediate demon,” like Lady Helmina had said earlier, and gotten overexcited when he thought he’d found one.

That overconfidence was probably why he was back to calling me a “bumpkin,” too.

On the other hand, the knight with the yellow spear looked deeply uncomfortable about how the rude noble was talking him up.

Since he was trying to get into the Shiga Eight, I'm sure he didn't want to get into a fight he might lose in front of a bunch of famous nobles at a garden party.

"Now, let us duel! Sir Jagou will be my proxy! Since it's a garden party, we'll say whoever gets in the first hit wins!"

The rude noble kept on blathering anyway.

It would be a simple matter to defeat Jagou, but I got the feeling that I wouldn't gain anything from winning that fight except more of Jagou's hatred.

As I was worrying about what to do, a helping hand came to my rescue.

"I won't have anyone trying to pick on our dear Satou."

"And who, pray tell, gave you permission to have a duel at *my* party? I won't allow such conduct in my garden."

Led over by a maid, the sultry beauty and Lady Litton stepped in on my behalf.

The servant must have noticed that the men were trying to start a fight with me and told Lady Litton and the others.

"M-Mrs. Litton, Mrs. Raffol... W-we were just trying to defend our honor, you see..."

The rude noble started falteringly making excuses.

Somehow, it all seemed a little familiar.

First Princess Menea and Lady Helmina, then the musician, and now Lady Litton and company... This would be a bit much, even if it was a running gag in a manga.

"What are you dragging me into, Sir Dotoumuru? I came here today to see a friend, you know."

"Come on, don't be like that. This battle needs a witness, but since Sir Jagou is the standin, I'm sure it won't take long."

I heard familiar voices in the crowd.

"O-over here!"

"There you are, Moushil! Here, I brought a great witness for ya."

One of the rude noble's friends dragged a handsome young man over.

Behind the young man came a gaggle of young noblewomen and wives, all batting their eyes.

"Rayleigh, you're involved in this nonsense, too?"

"Why, if it isn't Lady Ema and Lady Rayuna. You're both as beautiful as ever. I really just came to see a friend of mine, so hopefully this nonsense won't take long— Sir Pendragon! There you are!"

It was Marquis Ashinen's second son, Rayleigh, who gave Lady Litton a friendly greeting before spotting me and smiling.

"Y-you know him, Sir Rayleigh?"

"Sure do. He saved my life, owns the Dragonpen Trading Company that I run, and is one of my very best friends."

At that, the rude noble fell to his knees.

He was probably hoping that having the popular ladies' man Rayleigh on his side would help him out even if he made Lady Litton angry.

Now his entourage of nobles and the knight Jagou were slinking away from his side.

"I came as soon as I heard you were in the royal city."

"I'm honored. Your sea voyage must have been quick this time, then."

As I chatted with Sir Rayleigh, we went back to our seats, along with Lady Litton and company.

Before she left, Lady Litton said to the rude noble, "Know that if you lay a hand on Satou, you make an enemy of the house of Duke Litton." Between Lady Helmina's threat of violence and Lady Litton's threat of social ostracization, the rude noble's heart must have been in tatters.

Hopefully he would fade into the background, and we could continue sightseeing in the royal capital in peace.

Once the rude noble finally left, the rest of the garden party unfolded without any further incidents.

Even the awkward Lady Karina was able to talk to some new noblewomen, given the help from the sociable Princess Menea and the popular Lady Helmina.

That evening, Rayleigh invited me out for a night on the town with some other young noblemen.

“Sir Pendragon! This next place is my favorite!”

“Is that right? I’m looking forward to it, then.”

The places we’d visited so far ranged from a pub that boasted a show featuring scantily clad female dancers to a high-class bar where beautiful women from all over the world would chat with you to a musical tavern with topless waitresses. If this place was his favorite, that raised the bar even higher.

The place Rayleigh led us to was rather well-hidden in a side alley.

It was plain on the outside, but the inside was pretty fancy. Once inside, we had to go downstairs to the partially underground bar. Classy music was playing from the other side of the door.

“Well, well, weeeell, if it isn’t Lord Rayleigh. We haven’t seen your face in a while, now, have weee?”

When Sir Rayleigh opened the door, we were greeted by a muscular, hairy man.

Why...?

After the night out with Tolma in the old capital, this was the second time I’d ended a night on the town in a gay bar.

Along with the pale-faced young noblemen, I enjoyed a rather unusual night.

Just to be clear, it didn’t involve any of the indecent acts I’m sure Arisa would have gone wild about.

Duke Vistall's Home

“Satou here. Often when someone tries to get you to take on a difficult task, they’ll dangle a carrot in front of your nose. However, when the bait is something you don’t want in the least, it just drives home the lack of communication between you and your superiors.”

“What’s the matter? You look a bit down, at least by your standards... A letter?”

“Yeah, from Duke Vistall.”

On our seventh day in the royal capital, I received a letter from the house of Duke Vistall.

To summarize, it basically said, “Come to my mansion so I can thank you for your help with the airship incident.”

“Isn’t it a little late for that?”

“I mean, I’m sure he’s been busy dealing with the aftermath.”

“Hmm. So, when are you supposed to go?”

“Later this afternoon. Sorry, but you’ll have to go to the theater today without me.”

“But weren’t you looking forward to that? We can just do our own thing today so we can all go together another time. That’s fine with all of you, isn’t it?”

The others all agreed with Arisa’s suggestion.

I spent the morning with the group, then booked a carriage to take me to Duke Vistall’s home.

The mansion, which was a short distance away from the royal castle, looked extravagant, even based on the outer walls and main gates alone.

Since the lord of the house had just recently survived an assassination attempt, there were armed guards stationed at regular intervals outside the walls and several dozen groups of soldiers with dogs patrolling around the enormous garden.

“I beg your pardon, but I need to see your proof of nobility, please.”

The coachman had given my name and stated my business, but the poofy-haired gatekeeper still came to talk to me directly.

I showed him my identification, as well as the letter from Duke Vistall.

The gatekeeper examined both, then looked from my face to the documents in his hand and back several times, before finally allowing me to pass.

“Pretty tight security.”

Like at Lady Litton’s garden party, instead of getting out directly at the entrance, we had to park the carriage and go in through a side door.

“Please leave any swords, daggers, and so on with me.”

“As you can see, I am unarmed.”

I answered the guard outside the side door honestly, but he didn’t seem to believe me and required a body search and bag check before I could enter.

This was the case even though I wasn’t really carrying any bags, since everything I had was generally in Storage.

Once the search ended, I was told to pass through the side door and wait in the little hall for someone to come get me.

After I waited for nearly an hour, a slender maid with a intense face finally came.

“Sir Pendragon, yes? Please follow me.”

Without waiting for a response, the maid turned on her heel and quickly started walking.

Wow, what a warm welcome.

Along the way, we passed an entrance hall where a large group of well-dressed ladies and gentlemen were gathered.

“Is there a banquet tonight?” I asked.

The hall I’d been waiting in wasn’t very impressive, but this entrance hall we were passing was on the same level of extravagance as that at the royal castle. There was a borderline excessive amount of gaudy decorations, probably to show off Duke Vistall’s power and wealth. My heart went out to the servants who had to maintain all this stuff.

“Yes.”

The maid confirmed, but she gave no further details.

Soon, we took a shortcut across the courtyard.

Hmm?

I heard the sound of a flute.

Looking up, I saw a familiar-looking woman in a spire visible across the courtyard.

It was one of Duke Vistall’s wives. She was the one who’d been having an affair with the dove-summoning high official who was part of the suicide bomber plot; I remembered that she’d been isolated after the emergency landing.

Since she appeared to be confined to a tower now, I imagine she was part of the terrorist plot as well.

“Sir Pendragon, this way.”

As I was standing and looking up at the tower, the maid called out to me in a slightly irritated tone.

I apologized lightly and followed after her.

“Wait in this room, please. Once your turn arrives, an official will come to fetch you.”

They kept me waiting for three whole hours without so much as offering a single cup of tea; I was just entertaining the idea of going home when the “official” finally arrived.

Sure, I spent that time working on a new Person-Binding spell I was

developing, but still.

“Sir Pendragon. As thanks for helping to defend our esteemed leader His Excellency Duke Vistall from those villains, we present you with the following items.”

As I listened to the duke’s steward reciting a haughty-sounding thanks, I glanced around the gaudy audience hall.

It was as big as four gymnasiums put together, presumably used for evening balls and the like. The arched ceiling, nearly three stories high, was made primarily of glass, and delicate patterns had been carved into the beams and walls.

Behind the steward sat Duke Vistall in a luxurious throne, but thus far he had just glowered at me in silence.

My AR display told me that the grandiose silver cup hanging next to the throne was a Holy Chalice.

“Give the knight his gifts.”

On the steward’s order, a page carried over a single sword and a satin purse that appeared to contain money.

“I can’t believe he’d give some upstart honorary knight the Magic Sword granted by His Majesty...”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on one of the duke’s retainers grumbling quietly.

It was then that I realized this was one of the mass-produced Magic Swords I had given to the kingdom by way of the Echigoya Company.

When I accepted it, Duke Vistall finally spoke.

“That is a ‘Champion’s Sword,’ which the knights of the royal capital all desperately desire.”

I had never heard that name before.

“Since it was bestowed upon me by His Majesty, I cannot simply hand it to you. If you will assist in crushing the rebel army that has raised the standard of

revolt against me, then I will request His Majesty's permission to grant you that sword."

My reward, it seemed, was just the contents of the purse—which turned out to be gemstones, not money—and this mass-produced Magic Sword was bait to get me to enlist in his anti-rebel army.

Since he was evidently waiting for my response, I cautiously spoke. "So this is one of the famous Champion's Swords..."

"That's right. It's a world-famous sword that no amount of money can buy."

Wow, how flattering. I definitely could never tell anyone that it had taken me only a few minutes to make one of these.

"Yes, I can tell, even without drawing it from the scabbard. It is far too fine a weapon for one simple explorer such as myself."

At that, the duke's brow furrowed deeply, and his pasty face began to flush red with rage.

"Then you will not aid in the defeat of a rebel army that threatens the peace of the Shiga Kingdom?"

"I am a vassal of Baron Muno. I am afraid I cannot get involved in Your Excellency's territorial dispute without permission from my lord the Baron."

I tried to appease the duke as I politely declined, although he was the one who was trying to make his personal problems sound like the business of the entire kingdom.

"Besides, as I have no military experience, I would surely only slow down the elite soldiers of the Vistall Duchy army."

Most importantly, I definitely didn't want to fight in a war against other people.

If I had to take part in a slaughter of conscripted civilians on both sides, I would probably come away with a serious case of PTSD.

"I believe this Champion's Sword would be better suited in the hands of a worthy soldier of your army."

When I unhesitatingly returned the bait—I mean, Magic Sword—Duke Vistall pursed his lips and kindly gave me permission to leave: “Coward. Get out of my sight.” I tried not to let my gleeful relief show on my face as I left the hall.

“That took way longer than I expected...”

As I checked the time on my AR display, my thoughts turned toward the evening’s dinner.

“Eek!”

Hearing a small cry, I saw a young lady, whose lower body seemed to be stuck in a bush, flailing in a frantic attempt to get free. From the look of things, she must have tried to escape through the window above the bushes and failed.

“Are you all right?”

It didn’t look like she could get out on her own, so I went over and lent her a hand.

Once I saw her face up close, I realized she was the youngest daughter of Duke Vistall, Miss Somienna.

“Thank you... Oh! You’re the man from the airship!”

“Yes, my name is Satou Pendragon.” Since she recognized me at the same time, I reintroduced myself. “Are you headed out on an adventure, Miss Somienna?”

“Erm...” Somienna hesitated; then her eyes sparkled like she’d been struck with a brilliant idea. “Oh, I know! I’ll make you my retainer!”

Her ability to make selfish declarations without thinking about how they would inconvenience others was just like her father’s, Duke Vistall’s.

Not wanting to hurt her feelings by harshly turning her down, I just gave a polite, “That would be quite an honor.”

But of course, a little kid doesn’t understand what lip service is...

“Great, then let’s get going!” she declared. “I’ve got to bring a letter to my brother!”

“A letter?”

“That’s right! I wrote to him that if he doesn’t stop fighting with Father and get along, his favorite sister Enna’s not gonna like him anymore!”

I couldn’t help but smile at the innocent logic of a nine-year-old girl.

But if I really did bring her to the duchy where Sir Torriel was plotting a rebellion, it would probably cause some serious trouble.

“Sir Pendragon?”

Someone called out to me from the path I’d just left.

“Hello, Ms. Helmina.”

It was Lady Helmina, the gun user of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen.

She was out of uniform today, wearing another elegant dress of a different variety than the one she wore at the garden party.

Her brilliant presence disguised him at first, but I noticed that Sir Zef Juleburg, the head of the Shiga Eight, was with her in formal clothing as well.

“Thank you again for the other day, Sir Juleburg,” I said.

“It was an excellent battle. Come back to fi—that is, to *train* anytime,” he replied. “Since Gouen beat me to the punch, I didn’t get a chance to fight you yet.”

Sir Juleburg looked like he wanted to go for a round right that instant.

“By the way, are you here for the party, too? The young lady you’re escorting seems a bit young.” Lady Helmina peered at Somienna.

“No, actually...”

“You can’t tell any strangers!”

Before I could give a harmless excuse, Somienna jumped up and dragged me back by the arm.

Lady Helmina’s eyes crinkled in amusement.

“First platoon! To the mausoleum! Fifth platoon, cover the hole left by the first platoon!”

The relaxed atmosphere was ruined by tense voices shouting and the metallic

sound of armed soldiers clanking around.

“Sounds like something happened.”



“Indeed.”

As Lady Helmina and Sir Juleburg exchanged glances, I opened my map.

Armed skeletons, zombies, and other lesser undead monsters were appearing in droves at the mausoleum the soldier mentioned.

They were all low-level enough that the soldiers heading that way should have been able to handle them without a problem.

I checked just to be safe, but they seemed to be unrelated to the necromancer I'd seen before.

“Should we go have a look?”

“No need. It's probably a diversion.”

Sure enough, some skilled assassins were infiltrating through the back gate, let in by traitors on the inside.

Evidently, I was getting caught up in Duke Vistall's internal affairs yet again.

Attack on the Duke's Home

“Satou here. Video games are one thing, but I’ve never once had any desire to fight in a battle against other humans in the real world. Even now that I’m in a fantasy world with ridiculous powers, I still feel the same way.”

“They must be after the duke.”

Sir Juleburg took off his jacket as he shot Lady Helmina a signal with his eyes.

“Here you are, Sir Juleburg.”

“Thank you.”

Lady Helmina opened her Item Box, took out a spear, and handed it to Sir Juleburg; at the same time, she accepted his jacket with her other hand and put it into the Item Box.

They were as in sync as an old married couple.

“We will go protect the duke. Sir Pendragon, you bring this young lady to her room.”

“Understood.”

I patted the duke’s youngest daughter reassuringly on the shoulder.

If two of the Shiga Eight were heading to his side, the duke would surely be safe from harm.

“I—I want to go to Father, too!”

“No, it’s too dangerous. Besides, if you show up, your father’s guards will have to look after you, too.” Lady Helmina shouldered a long white gun as she admonished the little girl.

Hmm?

I heard a grating noise far in the distance.

“The royal capital air defense force’s horn?”

“Yes, and I hear the alarm bells from the watchmen in the tower, too.”

Sir Juleburg and Lady Helmina listened closely.

Just as I was starting to open my map, I saw a red light approaching at tremendous speed on my radar. At the same time, my “Sense Danger” skill reacted to something.

Looking up, I saw a monster swooping down toward us, carrying a sizable boulder.

“Get down!”

I covered Miss Somienna beneath me as I shouted a warning to the two Shiga Eight members.

The drone-beetle-like monster threw the boulder it was carrying.

Judging by its inertia, it was probably going to crash right into the main hall where the duke was.

The duke himself aside, any nearby maids and guests might get hurt, too.

I charged a bronze nail in my palm with magic power and produced a “Spellblade” spear.

“‘*Pierce*’—Blue Butterfly Gun!”

Before I could throw the spear, Lady Helmina steadied the long gun on her shoulder and pulled the trigger. She was pretty fast.

But even if the shot broke the boulder, the fragments would still be flying forward.

I quickly erased the now-pointless spear before anyone saw it and took my next move.

Using the psychokinesis-like spell Magic Hand, which I always had activated, I grabbed the biggest pieces and tried to slow them down.

Damn it.

There were too many fragments of the boulder for me to catch them all.

The first fragment hit the wall of the main building and shattered into dust and rubble.

As the second one hit, throwing up a cloud of dust that hid some of the bigger clumps, I put them all into Storage to minimize the damage.

I dealt with the other shards the same way, but I wasn't able to prevent the damage completely.

Fortunately, as far as I could tell from my map, no one had died in the boulder attack.

Before the dust cleared, I dropped some of the rock pieces in front of the building.

"Let's go, Helmina."

"Yes, Sir Juleburg!"

As screams and cries arose from the mansion grounds, the two Shiga Eight Swordsmen sprang into action.

"Sir Juleburg, this way would be faster!"

"Lead the way!"

Instead of taking the main hallway, they took a shortcut past the mausoleum where the skeletons had appeared.

"There she is! The duke's daughter!"

As the Shiga Eight pair left, a group of people in all black appeared through the dust cloud, their faces covered by cloth.

It was the assassins who'd been let in through a side entrance not long ago. There were three of them, all experienced fighters with levels in the high 20s.

"Eeeek!"

An unlucky maid who was passing by screamed when she saw the black-clad invaders.

"Kill any witnesses!"

One of the assassins threw a knife at the maid.

I'm not letting that happen.

I took out a pebble and flicked it to knock the knife away.

“Impossible!”

“He’s a strong one. Use demonic potions!”

Without hesitation, the men drank their potions and began emitting a dark-red aura.

The plunderers in the Celivera Labyrinth had used demonic potions, too; it made them incredibly tough, making it difficult to gauge how much to hold back.

“Fwa-ha-ha, this is the best.”

“Heh, we’re invincible now.”

“Don’t let your guards down! We’ll take him out with ‘Formation Blacksword.’”

“““Right!””””

The assassins seemed to be plotting some kind of synchronized attack, but that didn’t mean I had to go along with it.

I jumped in close, broke through the first man’s defense barrier with a palm strike, and knocked him down with a punch to the solar plexus. Then I knocked out the other two with kicks to the jaws.

“Th-the Black Assassin Band won’t go down that—”

The first guy I’d knocked down, evidently the leader, was still conscious, but I fixed that with another quick strike.

If I tied them up with wire or rope, they’d probably tear right through it when they woke up. I decided to use the Practical Magic spell Mana Drain to steal their magic; then I used a magic user–restraining item called “Anti-Magic Ivy” to tie them up.

“Now, then...”

I opened my map to assess the situation.

Judging by the movement of the dots, I could see that the soldiers and servants in the manor were running around in confusion. The explosive attack from that boulder must have thrown everything into chaos.

“Miss Somienna, we should go.”

I decided to bring her along to the duke after all.

Judging by what the assassins said, she was still a target, despite no longer having the Holy Chalice, and the duke was surrounded by knights to protect him and the chalice already.

Besides, that way I would probably meet back up with Sir Juleburg and Lady Helmina.

“Wait! I’m still worried about Father!”

I probably should have explained myself more clearly; Somienna seemed to have the wrong idea.

“I know, that’s why—”

“I found the duke’s daughter!”

My words were interrupted by another black-clad intruder appearing from Somienna’s window.

“—I’m going to take you to the duke.”

As I finished my statement to Miss Somienna, I took out this assassin in the same way as the others.

Then I tucked her under my arm and ran toward the main hall where the duke was located. As I limited my speed to a regular run, I also stealthily cast Enchant: Physical Protection and Enchant: Magic Protection for her safety.

“Battle noises?”

I could hear the sounds of weapons clashing in several areas of the mansion. The soldiers seemed to be fighting one another.

Since this attack was rooted in internal affairs, there must be some rebels among the soldiers.

It was impossible to tell who was on what side, so I ignored the fighting

soldiers and kept heading toward the hall, taking a shortcut past the mausoleum.

There were piles of human bones nearby, likely the remains of skeleton monsters.

I also saw three bodies of knights in black and silver armor. It wasn't just skeletons who'd invaded.

Hmm?

Amid the bones, I saw something shining.

It was a familiar brooch with an unusual design of eight swords forming a ring.

A sword-ring badge.

The proof of a Shiga Eight Swordsmen member, received from the king.

Sir Juleburg or Lady Helmina must have dropped it on their way past here.



"Uh-oh, wait a second."

Just as I arrived in front of the door to the main hall, I saw some information on my radar and skidded to a halt.

A dark figure crashed through the wall right in front of us.

"Eeeek!"

Somienna screamed from under my arm.

It was a knight in black full-body armor, right down to the full-face helmet.

Peering through the newly made hole in the wall, I saw the two Shiga Eight members doing battle with rebels, along with the Scarlet Nobleman Baronet Jelil. The duke's knights were protecting the duke, who was holding the Holy Chalice.

The ones fighting on the other side were knights, too.

Their armor and cloaks were also dyed black, perhaps to prevent friendly fire or to keep hidden while they were invading.

The knight who just crashed through the wall must have been one of the

rebels, too.

It's strange, though...

The movement of the black knights was impressive.

Their levels were only in the low to middle 30s, yet they were holding their own against the far more powerful Shiga Eight and Baronet Jelil.

As far as I could tell, they weren't using demonic potion like the assassins from earlier.

But a dark-red light was leaking from their breastplates.

That was probably the secret to their strength. As far as I could tell from the AR, the black-clad knights' armor was perfectly normal. They must be hiding some kind of Magic Item near their chests.

"Uuurgh..."

The black knight at my feet started to wake up, so I kicked her in the head to knock her out.

There was red light coming from her breastplate, too, but it flickered and faded when she was knocked unconscious.

So she was wearing the same equipment; I might as well figure out what it was, then.

"Sorry about this."

I tried ripping off the breastplate, but there were no magic circuits or wiring on the back of it, and the chain mail and under armor she wore below it looked perfectly ordinary.

I used "Spellblade" on my fingertip to cut through those, too.

Geh...

A gruesome sight filled my vision, like a mechanical device had forcefully fused with flesh. It was so horrific that I barely even noticed the modest cleavage surrounding it.

"Eek!"

Peeking over my shoulder, little Somienna gave a shriek and hid behind me.

Yeah, this definitely wasn't something kids should be seeing.

"I feel like I recognize this from somewhere..."

When my AR display showed the words **Demonic Heart**, I remembered where.

It was the unremovable cursed item that the terrorists on the airship were using.

I touched the eerily pulsating Demonic Heart and tried using "Mana Drain" to steal its power, but it immediately recharged from the wearer's magic instead.

Damn.

For just a moment, one part of the Demonic Heart almost transformed into the tentacle-like objects we saw on the airship. If I drained its magic carelessly, there was a good chance it would go haywire.

I checked through the wall to see if I had time to keep investigating.

"Looks like they're all right for now..."

They seemed to be busy with the swarm of black knights, but Lady Helmina was doing damage to them with her long-distance attacks. It didn't seem like they needed my help.

Baronet Jelil was contributing, too, defeating black knights while working with Lady Helmina.

And of course it goes without saying that the leader of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen was dominating. The three of them had already knocked out over half the black knights.

Relieved, I turned back to investigating whether the Demonic Heart could be removed.

First, I used the Practical Magic spell See Through to inspect it, but...

They don't call it "unremovable" for nothing.

Threadlike tentacles extended from the Demonic Heart, wrapping around the host's heart, veins, and lungs.

If I tried to rip it out, the host would almost certainly die.

I might be able to use an elixir after ripping it out, for her to regenerate, but I didn't want to put her life at risk when she didn't currently seem to be in danger.

I covered the black knight's chest with her cloak, then tied her up carefully and put her aside.

"We should get moving."

Since there were now only two black knights remaining in the room, I decided to bring Miss Somienna over to the duke.

In one hand, I picked up the mithril sword lying at my feet near the unconscious black knight, and in my other hand I held Somienna's hand as I entered the room.

"Sir Pendragon!"

Lady Helmina was the first to notice us entering the room, greeting me with a smile.

Judging by the sweat on her brow, it seemed like it had been a pretty intense battle.

I brought Miss Somienna over to the safe area where Duke Vistall was standing.

"Father!"

"Somienna!" the duke exclaimed.

His expression looked worried when he saw his daughter, then turned to rage as he laid eyes on me.

"You fool! Why would you bring my precious Somienna to such a dangerous place?!"

"Wait, Father! He brought me because I asked him to."

Somienna covered for me as her father practically sprayed spit all over me.

I had assumed that the duke only cared about the Holy Chalice, but it appeared that he really did care for his daughter, too.

“Some intruders broke into Miss Somienna’s room. I judged that I could not protect her properly there, which is why I decided to bring her here.”

“Nnngh...”

The duke seemed reluctantly convinced by this.

“Still, where did all these rebels come from?” I asked Lady Helmina, who was stationed near the duke.

“They used the chaos from that rock bombing to sneak in through the same route as the skeletons.”

I see, so they snuck in behind all the red dots of the skeletons while I was dealing with the boulder... No wonder I didn’t notice.

...Hmm?

A few red dots on my radar were coming closer.

That wasn’t news to me, but now two of them were positioned directly in the hall already. I turned the map into 3D mode.

CRACK.

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up a faint sound.

“Above us! Lady Helmina!”

Two black-clad assassins broke through the glass window in the ceiling and dropped toward us.

“..... ■ **Air Hammer Kitsui!**”

“..... ■ **Air Cushion Kiheki!**”

The assassins used Wind Magic in midair.

“Spirit of the royal capital, defend me! ■ **Protection Field Shugo Kekkai!**”

As the duke shouted, a transparent barrier like the Practical Magic spell Shelter formed. It must have been the power of the City Core.

The Protection Field blocked the Wind Magic easily, shielding the duke and his daughter.

Lady Helmina fired her Magic Gun, the shot ripping through the Air Cushion

and hitting the two assassins in midair.

The two of them hit the Protection Field as they fell and landed opposite the duke.

“Whew. Spirit, thank you for your protection.”

At that, the Protection Field around him disappeared.

There must be some limit on it, since it would’ve made more sense to me to keep it up for safety.

“Thanks for the warning. You really—”

“It’s not over yet!”

The assassins’ health bars weren’t yet at zero.

They sprang up, clad in red auras as they charged toward the duke and Lady Helmina.

“No way—but the Magic Gun hit them dead-on!”

Lady Helmina pointed the Magic Gun toward them again, while the duke’s guardian knights crowded in front of him to form a wall.

While I was hesitating for a split second over who to back up, things kept moving.

One of the assassins slid beneath the legs of the guardian knights, while the other used a short High Wind chant to send something powdery toward Lady Helmina.

Lady Helmina immediately covered her eyes and mouth with one arm. She was always quick to react.

“Spirit of the royal capital, defend—”

The duke’s chant wasn’t going to make it in time.

I used “Blink” to jump in front of him, and I kicked away the black dagger that was plunging toward his chest, along with the assassin’s arm.

“Gaaaah!”

As the assassin rocked backward, the swords of the guards pierced his body,

ending his life.

He unleashed a red spike as he fell, but I knocked it away with the side of the mithril sword in my hand.

When it made contact, the spike turned into a palm-sized ball of flame and exploded. It must have been some kind of assassination magic tool made with a fire stone.

“Hrmph, pathetic! You call yourselves knights of Vistall Duchy, yet you can’t even keep up with some paltry rebels?!”

Instead of thanking me for saving him, the duke scolded his subordinates.

I felt a little tug on my pants.

“Thank you.”

“Oh, it was nothing, really.”

I patted Miss Somienna’s head. She had much better manners than her father.



“Another intruder!”

“Jelil, stop him!”

I heard Sir Juleburg and Baronet Jelil shouting behind me.

“‘Evil Slasher’!”

Turning, I saw Baronet Jelil unleashing a slashing special attack against a massive man in black.

The giant assassin swung around an ax larger than himself and blocked Jelil’s special move head-on. The black ax shone with dark-red light, unleashing an attack seconds after Baronet Jelil’s.

“‘Burst Hacker’!”

There was a blinding flash, and a piercing metallic sound and the rumbling of the floor struck my ears.

Wasn’t that...

I had seen that move twice, both times in the royal capital.

My AR display revealed the giant's identity.

But I didn't need to read it to know.

It was...

"Don't underestimate us mithril explorers!"

As he was pushed back, letting out a spray of blood, Baronet Jelil unleashed another speedy attack: the "One-Handed Sword" move "Evil Piercer."

It didn't reach the assassin's body, but it did rip off the black cloth hiding his face.

"G-Gouen!"

Behind me, the duke exclaimed the giant's name in alarm.

"What are you doing here?!"

"It can't be..."

Sir Juleburg and Lady Helmina exclaimed in shock at their comrade's appearance, too.

The giant man in black—Sir Gouen—charged in silence.

Lady Helmina's Magic Gun fired several times to slow his charge, but he refused to stop.

The bullets grazed him, ripping his black overcoat and drawing blood, but he moved toward the duke with grim determination.

Dark-red light spilled from the holes in the overcoat.

It was the same light as those black knights had possessed.

Sir Gouen must have a Demonic Heart embedded in his chest like the others.

In my mind's eye, I saw his smile when he showed me images of his wife and children.

Did he know that no one equipped with a Demonic Heart had ever lived longer than a half-moon...?

“Stop!”

As I was lost in such thoughts, Sir Juleburg’s shout brought me back to my senses.

Sir Juleburg jumped in front of Sir Gouen and unleashed a barrage of rapid-fire strikes.

“Tch...”

Even Sir Gouen couldn’t just ignore that; he blocked the strikes with his giant ax.

He didn’t use a special attack like before, though.

It would have created too big an opening.

Red “Spellblade” sparks lit the pair as their blades clashed again and again, swapping between offense and defense.

Sir Juleburg was slowly being overwhelmed.

It made sense. Even demonic potion enhanced the user’s power by almost 10 levels.

Demonic Hearts were even more effective than that.

And the two of them were nearly evenly matched to begin with. It was all but inevitable that the tide of battle would turn in Sir Gouen’s favor when he was enhanced with the Demonic Heart.

“The Ray Ring Armor!”

The light around Sir Juleburg’s body was fading.

His protective “Light Magic” defense barrier must be breaking under the strain of Sir Gouen’s onslaught of attacks.

Lady Helmina, who’d been supporting him with the Magic Gun, began the chant for Ray Ring Armor.

But without her supporting fire, Sir Juleburg was on the defensive.

Something’s wrong.

Although only slightly, Sir Juleburg’s movements were slowing down by a

fraction every time he blocked one of Sir Gouen's attacks.

"I'll back you up."

I'd been standing in front of the duke and his daughter as a last line of defense, but at this rate, Sir Juleburg was going to lose.

"Satou!"

Sir Gouen was the one to shout in surprise, while Sir Juleburg was breathing heavily.

He swung his giant ax to ward off my approach.

What was that?

When the ax came close to me, I felt a chill run up my spine.

I glanced at my log and saw the answer.

> Resisted "Mana Drain."

> Resisted "Life Drain."

Ah, now I remember.

That ax was the same cursed weapon I'd seen in the museum.

If I remembered correctly, the exhibit said that it stole the magic and stamina of anyone it cut.

In reality, it seemed like it had an effect even if it grazed near the target.

Judging by Sir Juleburg's gauges in my AR display, a single swing didn't amount to much, but it seemed to add up to a serious disadvantage over time in a closely matched battle.

I traded places with Sir Juleburg to stand in front of Sir Gouen.

"You sure you want to fight me that close?"

"I know all about that ax's effects."

Sir Gouen's attacks were heavy.

Part of that was the nature of the giant ax, but with the added boost from the Demonic Heart, every one of them had as much force as a special move.

It wasn't as bad as the black greater demon, but he certainly outclassed the demon-form Ludaman that I'd fought in Labyrinth City.

As we clashed for a while, Sir Gouen started making conversation.

"So you were hiding your true strength after all, eh?"

"No, I've just got more strength than usual right now because it's a near-death situation."

"Yeah, right!"

I realized from Sir Gouen's footwork that he was trying to find a gap between the attacks from me and Sir Juleburg to try to lunge toward the duke.

"Damn, you're tough."

As Sir Gouen grumbled, Sir Juleburg's spear plunged toward him from his blind spot.

Judging by the flash of swirling Spellblade, it must be the special move "Helix Spear Attack."

"Tch... 'Burst Hacker'!"

Sir Gouen unleashed a special move of his own.

Unlike usual, it moved in a horizontal direction to keep me away; then he spun with the momentum to counter Sir Juleburg's special attack.

As their two special attacks clashed, the shock waves tore up the expensive-looking carpet in a circle around them.

The guardian knights readied their shields to protect the duke from the shock waves.

Hmm?

There was another red dot on my radar.

As I held Sir Gouen off and glanced to the side, I saw a transparent black knight sneaking up behind the duke and company.

From the look of it, he must have been using a "Light Magic" illusion or a transparency cloak.

“Lady Helmina! There’s an attacker behind you!”

I pulled out a stiletto throwing knife and tossed it at the traitor.

The black knight jumped back, revealing himself in the process.

He held a familiar yellow spear.

“Jagou! You too?!”

Lady Helmina cried out in despair, even as she pointed her gun toward him.

“I am not that noble knight Sir Jagou! I am—”

Before he could finish his foolish attempt at a diversion, Lady Helmina’s bullet flew toward him.

“Not a chance!” He jumped back with “Blink” to dodge the bullet and ran toward Lady Helmina.

He definitely wasn’t moving like the guy who’d gotten thoroughly trounced by Liza and me.

“Don’t get distracted!”

Sir Juleburg came flying toward me, looking bloodied.

Beyond him stood Sir Gouen, who was getting ready to use “Burst Hacker.”

I didn’t have any choice. If I dodged Sir Juleburg, then Sir Gouen’s special attack would cut him in two before I could move to counter it.

I caught Sir Juleburg and let the impact send me flying into the wall behind me.

“I figured you’d do that!”

Sir Gouen used “Blink” and unleashed the special attack, sending it toward Sir Juleburg’s back.

Good, exactly like I thought.

I twisted myself around to switch places with Sir Juleburg in midair, then spun around with my mithril sword to block the “Burst Hacker.”

There was a loud *clang*, and the mithril sword I’d picked up broke in the middle, scattering with a flash of red light.

I guess it was a bit too much to try to block Sir Gouen's special attack with his massive sword head-on using only an ordinary mithril sword with a faint amount of Spellblade.

The ax kept coming toward me after breaking the sword, but its momentum had slowed. I used "Magic Power Armor" on my knee to kick the ax away, successfully avoiding the special attack.

Sir Gouen dashed past Sir Juleburg, and I dashed toward the duke.

I released Sir Juleburg to land on the floor faceup, twisted myself around right before landing, and kicked off the floor to chase after him.

"I won't let you do that, Pendragon!"

The knight with the yellow spear stood in my way.

Across the room, I saw Lady Helmina pointing her Magic Gun at Sir Gouen, even as blood dripped from her forehead.

Picking up an iron sword from the floor, I fought off Jagou.

"Stay out of our way!"

Enhanced with the Demonic Heart, the knight was now powerful enough to go toe-to-toe with the Shiga Eight, but he didn't stand a chance against me when I wasn't worried about holding back.

I sent him flying with a single blow, and he bounced off the walls of the spacious hall several times.

Then I turned back, only to see Sir Gouen avoiding Lady Helmina's shots and cutting her down.

Fortunately, she used the Magic Gun as a shield to avoid any fatal wounds, but her shoulder was red with blood as she went flying past the duke and his daughter, who she'd been shielding behind her.

The knights guarding the duke were still clustered together, but there was no way they'd be able to stop someone who even the Shiga Eight members couldn't defeat.

They were knocked aside in a matter of seconds.

The duke was once again protected by the City Core barrier.

“‘Burst Hacker’!”

Sir Gouen’s point-blank special attack broke through the Protection Field in one fell swoop.

Red light scattered along with the pale shards of the transparent barrier.

If I moved now, while he was standing still, I could make it.

“DON’T INTERFEEEEERE!”

Just as I was about to use “Blink,” the now-bloodied knight with the yellow spear jumped in front of me again.

I guess Demonic Heart users are even tougher to take down than demonic potion users.

I used even more strength than before to punch the knight aside. The sickening feeling against my fist made me worry that I’d killed him, but he was still alive.

“N-no...stoppp!”

As Sir Gouen closed in on him, the duke screamed for mercy and flung out his hands.

“Please forgive my disloyalty.”

Sir Gouen brought down his giant ax toward the duke.

But then it stopped before reaching him.

“Please don’t kill Father!”

Somienna had jumped in front of the duke, her arms spread wide.

The giant ax was stopped right in front of her nose.

“I’m sorry.”

Grimacing, Sir Gouen pushed Somienna aside, and brought his ax toward the duke’s despairing face— “...You again, Satou?”

Sir Gouen glared at me, the sword in my hands stopping his ax from reaching its target.

Then there was a blaze of red light.

It was Sir Juleburg's "Spellblade Shot."

"He always does the most insane things..."

Sir Gouen shook his head, his ax deflecting the "Spellblade Shot" as he looked at Sir Juleburg.

That attack seemed to have used up the last of his strength. Sir Juleburg was lying unconscious in a pool of his own blood.

"What now, Satou? You gonna fight me without any help from Sir Juleburg or Lady Helmina?"

"Hmm, I wonder..."

My plan thus far had been to support the Shiga Eight members and have them get Sir Gouen under control, but now that they were both out of commission, that wasn't going to work.

Still, if I defeated a Shiga Eight member one-on-one while he was boosted with a Demonic Heart, I would definitely end up getting dragged into becoming a member myself.

"I don't particularly owe the duke anything..."

I glanced at him sideways as a bit of revenge for earlier.

Of course, I wouldn't really abandon him, if only for Somienna's sake.

"Wh-what are you saying?! If you protect me from Gouen, all the wealth and power you could dream of will be yours! Defeat Gouen for me!"

The duke took me seriously and started getting desperate.

I wished he would put that Protection Field back up already, but he wasn't making any move to do so after seeing Sir Gouen destroy it right in front of him so easily.

Come to think of it, if he could use the City Core's powers even in the royal capital, why couldn't he just teleport away?

Maybe those powers were limited outside of his territory.



“You heard the man. But without your own weapon, I doubt you can keep up with my ax using only an iron sword.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.”

I held the iron sword at the ready.

The sword I’d picked up off the floor at random looked fancy at a glance but was actually quite dull; after blocking just one attack from the ax, the blade had blinked halfway down.

I used “Spellblade” on the sword.

“‘Spellblade’ on an iron sword? You’re still full of surprises.”

“I do have some confidence in my magic control.”

My plan was to draw him away from the duke, toss some magic potions to the heavily injured Shiga Eight pair and Baronet Jelil to heal them, duck out once they were back in battle, and return as Nanashi the Hero to finish things off.

“At any rate, if you’ve caught your breath, shall we continue?”

“You caught me, huh? Fine, let’s go!”

Sir Gouen charged with the force of a raging bull.

After we exchanged blows a few more times, I realized something bad.

Since “Spellblade” wouldn’t stick to the iron sword for long, it was going to break before too soon.

It probably wasn’t just because of the iron sword that my “Spellblade” was getting dispelled so easily, either. The powers of Sir Gouen’s giant ax probably had something to do with the failure, too. What an annoying weapon.

The ax swung toward my neck; I ducked to avoid it, picked up another sword from the floor, and swung it up at him.

Uh-oh. I messed up.

Blood spurted from two wrists that now ended in stumps.

The slashed-off hands went flying behind me, along with the giant ax.

“So, you let the sword get broken on purpose... You’re good, Satou.”

Having lost both his hands, Sir Gouen jumped away from me.

I hate to admit it, but that was just a coincidence. Sorry.



“Well, that’s that.”

Sir Gouen tilted back his head and sighed in defeat.

Hopefully he would surrender now.

“■■■ **Flash Gravel Senreki.**”

I thought he was doing a chant for Healing Magic, but instead he unleashed a flash of light toward the ceiling.

“Is that the signal to withdraw?” I asked Sir Gouen as I distributed magic potions to Sir Juleburg, Lady Helmina, and Baronet Jelil.

The assassins and black knights were already wiped out, but there were still a fair amount of soldiers fighting among themselves.

“No, it’s a funeral signal.”

Well, I don’t like the sound of that.

I checked the map to make sure they weren’t going to switch to a suicide-bomb approach, but I didn’t see anyone carrying such things.

“Urk...”

With a gurgling cough, Sir Gouen spat up blood.

A moment later, the leather armor around his chest cracked open, and thin dark-gray tentacles burst out and twined around his entire body before I could do anything.

“Wha...?!”

As I was frozen in shock at the sci-fi-esque development, the surfaces of the tentacles fused together to form a dark-gray full-body armor.

A disturbing second face formed from his forehead to the right side of his temple.

Tentacles stretched from his wrists to recover the giant ax. They formed a sort

of tentacle gauntlet, gripping the ax with artificial fingers.

“SorRY, Satou. I’m borrowing the poWER of the magic FLUTE.”

As he spoke, the mouth area of his helmet and that of the newly formed face on the side of his head moved like living things.

The Demonic Heart had gone into rampage mode. I wasn’t sure why it was a different effect from the wildly flailing tentacles I saw on the airship, though.

He said something about a “magic flute,” but he didn’t have any item like that, and my “Keen Hearing” skill wasn’t detecting any flute-like noise.

“I hear a flute, sir.”

I saw Pochi and Tama in the back of my mind.

That was right before those tentacles appeared on the airship.

“Arisa—”

I used the Space Magic spell Telephone to call Arisa.

“Hellooo, you’ve reached your darling sweetheart, Arisa...”

“Can you bring Pochi and Tama to Duke Vistall’s mansion?”

“Okey-dokey, I’m on—”

“PendragOOOOOOON!”

A strange bellow interrupted Arisa’s words.

It was the yellow-spear knight Jagou, even though I’d taken him down earlier. He was charging at me with gray tentacle armor like Sir Gouen’s.

He was moving incredibly fast. Even using “Blink” with the support of the “Body Strengthening” skill wouldn’t produce that kind of speed.

I parried his spear with my sword and used my other hand to punch the knight’s helmeted head.

It was only then that I realized a new face had formed on his head, too.

“Damn YOU!”

That attack would normally knock someone out, but he withstood it and

struck again.

He was even tougher than an average Demonic Heart user.

His attacks were strong, too, so much so that I doubted any other human in the area except for me could have withstood them.

Fortunately, the people who were completely unconscious didn't go into rampage mode—of all the Demonic Heart holders in the area, it was only Sir Gouen and Sir Jagou who were now in tentacle armor.

“JaGOU! Keep Satou BUSY!”

“Keep him BUSY? Don't make me LAUGH! I'm all-powerful right NOW. PendraGON, stop right THERE!”

Shoot.

Having pulled out a scroll, I quickly cast an Implosion spell between Sir Gouen and the duke.

That should keep Sir Gouen busy for at least a good ten seconds.

I pretended to have been hit by the knight's attack, and I let myself slam into the wall on the garden side, tumbling out of the room with the crumbling wall.

“There you ARE, PendraGON!”

The knight went over to the unconscious Sir Pendragon's body on the ground and stabbed him repeatedly with the yellow spear.

“Ha-ha-ha-HA, what's wrong, PendraGON? Put up a FIGHT!”

The crazed knight continued stabbing the unmoving body maniacally, even as a pool of blood spread around it.

Obviously, that wasn't actually me he was stabbing—it was a demi-goblin knight's corpse with an illusion cast over it.

I'd better move before he figures it out.

Hiding myself with a transparency cloak, I used the “Quick Change” skill to transform into Nanashi the Hero.

“How long are you going to keep that up?”

I used “Warp” to sneak up behind the yellow-spear knight and grabbed his arm and collar.

“Wh-WHO are—”

Without giving him the chance to turn around and finish his demand, I used “Flashrunning” to move up to the ceiling of the hall in an instant.

Meanwhile, Sir Gouen had rushed through the blast of Implosion and arrived in front of the duke.

I let go of Sir Jagou above the hole in the ceiling and used “Flashrunning” again to land in front of Sir Gouen.

“Grrr—who are YOU?!”

“Nanashi the Hero.”

Keeping my response short, I produced the Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis from Storage and knocked his giant hammer away.

Combat was definitely a lot easier with a weapon I was used to wielding.

“Nanashi the HERO? The one who beat the Boar LORD and DogHEAD?”

I simply nodded.

The knight falling from the ceiling hit the floor and stayed stuck.

“Surrender,” I advised Sir Gouen as I watched this from the corner of my eye.

“Sorry, but I CAN’T.”

“Why not?”

That’s what I wanted to know.

“I can’t say why, EITHER. Then there’d be no point in turning against my lord in the first PLACE.”

His wife and children in his hometown were probably being held hostage to keep him quiet, then.

“I see.”

“Glad you’re so quick on the uptake.”

DEEEEEAMONZHEAAAAAART.

The second face let out a grating howl, and black fog formed around Sir Gouen's tentacle armor.

According to my AR display, it had the same effect as Sir Gouen's ax.

"Let's see how well this heretical power works against a HERO."

"Fine." I nodded.

"RAAAAH!"

As he attacked, I stood still and deflected the barrage with only one hand.

I wasn't mocking him, but rather trying to show him the difference in our strength so he would back down.

"'Burst Hacker'!"

His barrage shifted into a special attack, slashing up from the soles of my feet to the top of my head.

From his perspective, I slid right through the red arc that his special attack traced in the air.

"What THE—?!"

"'Warp.'"

I gave a one-word explanation of how I'd avoided the attack.

Unlike "Blink," it could be used without any other movement, making it difficult to perceive for someone who had never seen it before.

"Master, we're here."

The dots on my radar indicated that Arisa and the others had appeared near the mansion.

"Things are getting crazy in there, huh?"

"Have Pochi and Tama chase down the source of the flute sound, please. If possible, confiscate the flute or destroy it."

"Okey-dokey."

If I didn't stop the magic flute that was putting Sir Gouen's and the knight's Demonic Hearts into rampage mode, the other Demonic Heart users would transform into tentacle armor, too.

That was why I called in help from Arisa, Tama, and Pochi.

"I'll leave Tactical Talk connected so we can communicate. And I put both of them in recognition-inhibiting ninja outfits, so there's no fear of them being identified."

It was great to have someone as dependable as Arisa always thinking of even the finer details.

"Give up?"

"Not YET!"

DEEEEEAMONZHEAAAART.

The second face on Sir Gouen's helmet howled again, and the fog around his tentacle armor all gathered at the giant ax.

The ax began to transform with a creaking sound.

"Wow, a second form?"

"Looks like IT. I've never seen this, EITHER."

So even Sir Gouen didn't know about it?

My AR display showed that its attack power and sharpness had more than doubled.

"Hope you don't mind if I struggle to the very END."

As the ax emitted an umbral glow, Sir Gouen launched a series of attacks that abandoned defense entirely.

With the effects of "Foresight: One-on-One Battle" and other skills, it was easy for me to dodge, but normally this would've been quite a tough battle.

"'Burst Hurricane'!"

The special move began in the same way as his usual "Burst Hacker," but shifted forms partway through, changing rapidly from a sideways strike to

vertical to diagonal.

As a bonus, the ax even transformed partway through the move and changed its length.

I used “Magic Power Armor” to shield myself and a combination of “Gap Defense” and “Warp” to get through Sir Gouen’s special attack.

Even so, the floor we were standing on was all but destroyed in the process.

“PendragooOOOOON!”

Cloaked in a black aura, the yellow-spear knight unleashed a “Helix Spear Attack” toward me.

For a second, I was worried that he’d figured out my identity, but then I saw the crazed look in his eyes and realized that he couldn’t tell who he was fighting anymore.

But I couldn’t let Sir Gouen kill the duke while I was dealing with this guy.

It was a little violent, but I decided to cut off his arms and legs.

While he was in the air, I put his yellow spear and now-detached limbs in Storage, using Magic Hand.

I’ll stick them back on with an advanced magic potion later, so just hang in there for a bit.

In the meantime, I closed his wounds with lesser Healing Magic so he wouldn’t die of blood loss.

“H-help me! Hero!”

I heard the duke scream behind me.

Just as I’d feared, Sir Gouen had used the few seconds it took me to dispense with the knight to attack the duke again.

Luckily, the duke had put the Protection Field back up, but that didn’t mean I could leave him alone.

I used “Warp” to get in front of the duke, cut off Sir Gouen’s tentacle hands, and kicked him in the chest as hard as I could.

At the same time, I touched the giant ax with Magic Hand and put it away in Storage, and I blasted the tentacles writhing on the ground with “Spellblade Shot.”

“PendragoooOOOOOOON!”

Using appendages grown from his tentacle armor, the yellow-spear knight was crawling toward me, dragging himself along the ground.

He seemed to have used too many tentacles to form the limbs: The tentacle helmet was gone, leaving his face exposed. It was a disturbing sight.

Then two blasts of light hit the knight in the head, making it burst apart like a watermelon.

“Looks like Sir Juleburg and Helmina are BACK...”

Sure enough, it was Sir Juleburg’s “Spellblade Shot” and Lady Helmina’s Magic Gun that had finished off the yellow-spear knight.

“■■■ **Flash Gravel Senreki.**”

Sir Gouen’s spell created pebbles of light.

Danger.

Trusting my skill’s alarm bells, I jumped forward to stop whatever he was about to do.

But by the time I jumped, it was already too late.

His tentacle hand was reaching for the forehead of his armor.

And it was holding a long, red horn—the cursed object that could turn humans into demons.

The tentacle armor around Sir Gouen’s body began to pulsate and swell, growing larger.

“We found the flute persoon...?”

“It’s no good, sir. They won’t give us the flute, sir.”

“As long as they can’t play it, it’s fine. Use some sleeping powder.”

While I responded to Tama and Pochi, I used Magic Hand to move those who

were injured or unable to battle out of the hall.

“Arisa, get the people I just sent out to safety, please.”

“Okey-dokey!”

I left the guardian knights to evacuate the duke and his daughter, who could walk on their own, and asked Arisa to support all of them.

“Let us help.”

“I’ll back you up, if it’s all right.”

I shook my head at Sir Juleburg and Lady Helmina.

“No thanks. Instead...” I pointed at the duke and the others who were trying to leave the hall. “Help them.”

Sir Juleburg looked a bit reluctant, but Lady Helmina agreed immediately, and they both ran off.



“DEEEEAMONZ...”

Transformed into a demon, Sir Gouen howled up at the ceiling.

He didn’t even seem to be Gouen anymore: His name had disappeared from the AR display, and his race had changed to **Demon**. His level had also gone up from 51 to 60.

I thought that long horns turned people into only intermediate demons, but since Gouen’s original level was already so high, he was on a par with a greater demon.

His body had also become larger—he was now twenty feet tall, nearly three times his height from before.

The armor-like surface around him had turned into something like a living thing, and the area that had been covered by the helmet became an inflamed face. There was a faint trace of Gouen’s facial features that still remained.

For some reason, the second face that had been on his helmet was gone now.

“We’ve got the magic flute. Pochi and Tama are tying up the unconscious

rebels and evacuating the injured and civilians."

"Tie, tie, tie 'em up...?"

"Pochi is a pro at guiding, sir."

They seemed to have things under control.

"THE DUKE...GOT AWAY, HRRRUH?"

Finishing his howl, Gouen looked down at me.

He appeared to have retained self-awareness, even after turning into a demon.

"You wanted to kill him so badly you were willing to become a demon?"

"THAT'S...RIGHT. I HAD...NO OTHERRR CHOICE."

Gouen responded in broken speech, occasionally interrupted by strange noises. It was difficult to understand.

I guess it was the only way he could save his wife and children...

"I can go save them if you want. Would that help?"

"I CAN'T...TAKE THWAT RISK."

A risk, huh?

I guess that was a natural response, since he didn't know my full strength.

"THIS BODY...WILL LAST...EVEN SHORTER...NRRROW."

There were no examples of anyone surviving more than half a month after equipping a Demonic Heart, the prime minister had said.

Gouen must have known that and chosen his wife's and children's lives over his own.

"LET'S...RRRR...GOOOO!"

Gouen's hand transformed to create a writhing, semi-alive giant ax.

A single swing destroyed the floor of the hall, and the shock waves blew away the walls.

I protected myself from the shock waves and rubble with the "Flexible Shield"

skill multiplied by six, then used “Skyrunning” to put myself right in front of him to keep his focus on me.

This form was far more powerful than the tentacle armor, on a par with even the black greater demon. I used Claidheamh Soluis and “Flexible Shield” to deflect the powerful attacks.

The demonified Gouen’s ax destroyed one “Flexible Shield” within three to five strikes. That was two or three times stronger than the Evil Dragon in the labyrinth.

But no matter how strong the attack, it didn’t matter if it couldn’t hit me.

I made full use of “Flashrunning,” “Warp,” “Gap Defense,” “Evasion,” and other such skills to keep leading Gouen around by the nose.

I had several chances to defeat him, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it: I kept remembering the image of him smiling as he showed me pictures of his family.

“WHAT’S THE MATTERRRR, HERO?!”

DEEEEEAMONZHEAAAART.

Gouen howled and unleashed a black beam-like breath attack from his throat.

It sliced through one of the towers of the duke’s manor diagonally and even destroyed another noble’s mansion next door.

“If I keep dragging this fight out, I guess there’ll only be more casualties...”

I steeled myself and charged toward Gouen.

“FINALLY UP FORRR A FIGHT, EH?! ‘BURST HACKER’!”

As the giant ax swung down from nearly thirty feet overhead, I blocked it with Claidheamh Soluis, fully loaded and enlarged with magic power.

The ax was sliced clean in half, spilling black blood everywhere, like a living creature.

I swung my blade back to slice from the shoulder toward the heart— But as I hesitated for a moment, Gouen took that chance to knock me away with his massive arm.

Oh no.

Gouen flew past the broken wall and fired another black beam.

I couldn't see them, but the dots on my radar told me that the duke and company were in the area where he'd shot.

I used "Flashrunning" to go to their rescue—

"I won't let you, I declare."

As I sprang past the wall, I saw a knight in golden armor protecting the duke and the others from the black beam. It was Nana.

"Violence against larvae is strictly forbidden, I inform."

"OUT OF MRRRRY WAY!"

Gouen charged forward, and Nana activated her defense mode Fortress to stop him.

The voice changer I'd recently installed in the golden armor would help disguise Nana's voice, but her distinctive way of speaking would probably give her away immediately to anyone who knew her.

"RNNNGH!"

The tentacles growing from his right wrist tried to slither around Nana's defenses to attack the duke, but they were all shot down by a blue light from afar.

Lulu.

She was shooting from atop a nearby aqueduct.

"Sorry if I overstepped, Master." Arisa apologized over Tactical Talk. "I brought the others just in case."

"Don't be sorry. I appreciate it."

I had nearly let the duke and his daughter die because of my hesitation.

"Pseudo-spirit?"

"Sorry, Mia. If you use a pseudo-spirit, we'll be found out for sure."

"Mrr."

Mia appeared to be positioned next to Lulu.

“BURST HURRICANE’!”

Turning his arm back into an ax, Gouen used his special attack as a diversion to try to get past Nana.

Just then, a flash of red light shot toward him like a bullet.

“Draco Buster’!”

It’s Liza.

The two special moves clashed, unleashing a blinding flash of scarlet and dark-crimson light.

As their weapons locked for a moment, Liza’s dragon spear came out on top, breaking Gouen’s ax and sending the two of them flying to the other side of the garden.

“I’ll take care of things here. Hurry up and get them out.”

Sir Juleburg was readying his spear to join the battle, but I stopped him and went after Liza myself. Sir Juleburg hesitated for a moment, but luckily he prioritized the safety of the duke’s family.

“DAMNED SERVANT OF THE HERO!”

Once I caught up to them, I saw Gouen driving Liza back with more black beams.

I leaped out in front of Gouen, and we engaged in another close-combat battle.

“Thanks, Liza. I’ll take it from here.” I spoke to her through Tactical Talk.

“Master, forgive my presumption, but please let me deal the finishing blow.”

She must have seen my spineless moment earlier.

“It is my role as a slave to dirty my hands in place of my master.”

Liza looked at me seriously.

“No. That’s not right.”

As a guardian, it would be wrong to make one of my charges do something I didn’t want to do myself.

"But, master..."

"Aaand cut!" Arisa interrupted. *"This conversation is getting nowhere."*

"Yes, Arisa. We should seek a way to disable him without destroying him, I propose."

"Mm. New approach."

"Spinny spiiin..."

"Turn it around, sir!"

The rest of the group chimed in one by one.

I guess I must have worried all of them.

"Couldn't you break the horn, or get rid of the...what's it called, a Demonic Heart? The thing that turned him into a tentacle person?"

"Master, if the tentacles go into rampage mode like on the airship, would that knock him out?"

Arisa's words must have given Lulu the idea.

"No, it was already in rampage mode before he turned into a demon."

"What's different from the time on the airship, I wonder?"

"Sound," Mia answered.

"Sound?"

"Mm. Wind sound. Breaks the rhythm."

Sound.

The sound of the wind.

The magic flute sound that I couldn't hear.

"Wait, that's it! Tama, Pochi, the flute from before!"

The magic flute that had put them into rampage mode was the key.

"WHAT, YOUR HEARRRRT'S NOT IN IT?!"

My vision suddenly swam, and I was thrown into some bushes.

I was so focused on the conversation that I missed my chance to dodge Gouen's attack.

It was fairly painful. Glancing at the HP gauge from the corner of my eye, I saw that I'd taken a few points of damage, although my "Auto-Recovery" skill fully healed me even as I watched.

Still, I don't like pain. I had better focus.

"Fluuute..."

"We brought it, sir!"

Tama and Pochi were in the bushes in their ninja outfits.

They were watching the battle from there, since they didn't have their golden armor on.

I thanked them and took the flute, then went back to the battlefield where Liza was holding Gouen off.

"Liza, hang in there a little longer. Lulu, Arisa, back her up."

"Understood!"

"Yes, sir! I'm on it!"

"Okey-dokey, your dear Arisa can handle the worst attacks."

Nodding at the dependable responses, I brought the flute to my mouth.

I didn't know how to play it to activate rampage mode, so I tried imitating the melody that the duke's wife had played on it before.

I still couldn't hear the sound of the flute.

"THE MAGIC FLUTE? HOW DO YRRRROU HAVE THAT?!"

"Meeew..."

"Waaah, sir."

I understood why Gouen was alarmed, but for some reason Tama and Pochi were covering their ears and flailing around under the bushes.

As I continued my performance despite my lack of musical sense, Gouen started bellowing.

“UORRRRRROWOOOOORRRRRRR!”

DEEEEAMONZHEAAART.

His skin began to pulsate, part of it starting to rip away like a bandage coming off.

Huh?

For just a second, underneath the dull gray exterior, I caught a glimpse of brown skin.

Then my AR display showed something promising. The name “Gouen” overlapped with the empty name field in the information it showed next to him.

I remembered something else the prime minister had said.

A Demonic Heart “contains the crystalized heart of a demon.”

If rampage mode was activated by freeing the “crystallized heart of a demon” from its shackles...

Then could it be that this demon wasn’t Gouen himself, but the living creature called a Demonic Heart that had transformed from armor into a demon using the power of the long horn?

Its mind had certainly still been that of Gouen.

There was a possibility that Gouen himself had been turned into a demon, too, by his connection to the Demonic Heart.

But still...

“It’s worth a shot!”

I used the Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis to slice off Gouen’s hands and feet.

The hands immediately turned back into tentacles, slithering toward me like snakes.

“Master, I’ll take care of them.”

“Perfect, thank you!”

I left Liza in charge of destroying the dark-gray tentacles.

“GRRROWORRR!”

DZZZEAMONZ.

Ignoring his howl, I pinned Gouen to the ground.

Using Magic Hand to operate the magic flute, I used the “Holy Light Armor” skill on both of my now empty hands, surrounding them with bluish light.

This was the same skill I’d once used to attack the green demon’s real body through its doppelgänger.

Please, let this work.

With a silent prayer, I drove my palm into the area of his heart.

“UOOOOOOWWROOOOOWRRR!”

DEEEEAMONZHEAAAART.

Another wail and another howl.

Blue light spread across the gray surface, peeling the tentacles away from his body.

But that only lasted for a moment before they tried to return.

I don’t think so!

Wincing at the sensation of flesh caving in under my fingers, I dug the Demonic Heart out of Gouen’s chest.

“Arisa!”

“Got it!”

In perfect harmony with me, Arisa teleported Gouen’s body to a nearby meadow.

Arisa never failed to impress me. Even without any prior discussion, she perfectly understood what I needed her to do.

“Liza, if you could.”

“Right away, sir!”

As the Demonic Heart began to take human form on its own, I asked Liza to deal with it, since she’d already defeated the tentacles.

I used “Warp” to teleport over to Gouen, who was lying with a gaping hole in his chest.

“Hrggh...”

The shadow of death was over Gouen’s face as he coughed up blood.

I won’t let him die.

For his wife and children’s sakes, too.

I took out a lesser elixir from Storage and poured it over his chest, where his heart had been.

In the blink of an eye, his heart re-formed, and his tattered lungs began to recover.

Gouen should be safe now.

“Master—”

Hearing Liza’s voice, I turned and saw that the Demonic Heart had failed to complete a human form and was trying to send its tentacles to grasp Liza instead.

It appeared to be unable to function as a demon without a human to serve as a core.

“It’s like a parasite.”

“Seriously.”

Nodding in agreement with Arisa, I used “Warp” to go back to Liza’s side.

“Thanks, Liza. I’ll take it from here.”

The Demonic Heart jumped forward to try to absorb me.

Right before it hit, I covered my body in the “Holy Light Armor” skill.

DZZZZEAMONZ.

I grabbed the Demonic Heart before it could get away.

Still holding on to it, I activated a spell between my hands.

Forge.

It was the same intermediate Fire Magic spell that had once burned away even the Golden Boar Lord beneath the old capital.

DZZzz.

Even transformed into a demon by a long horn, the Demonic Heart couldn't withstand the flames that had once vaporized a demon lord. It was burned away in an instant, turned into black smog and gray ash, and it disappeared.

"Master, the Shiga Eight pair took care of the tentacles over here," Arisa reported.

My magic flute performance must have accidentally activated the Demonic Heart in the female black knight who'd been lying in the hall.



"Gouen!"

Lady Helmina cried out as I returned with the weakened Sir Gouen on my back.

Arisa had already gotten the rest of my group away with Space Magic.

"Is he alive?"

"Yep. He probably can't move, though."

As I responded to Sir Juleburg, I laid Sir Gouen down on the floor.

"He's alive, you say?!" The duke, who'd been slumped on the floor, jumped up with rage. "Kill him, then! Death alone would be too light a sentence for a heretical fool who turned against his lord and used some horrible, cursed object! His entire clan should be executed for treason!"

The duke was practically frothing at the mouth with fury.

"Your Excellency, please deal with me however you see fit." Sir Gouen raised his head pleadingly. "But I beg you, please spare my family and your son..."

I wasn't quite sure why he would prioritize sparing the life of the duke's son, who started the rebellion, over the lives of his own wife and children.

"Preposterous! Rebelling against your lord is an unforgivable sin!"

“Father, please! Don’t kill Gouen and my dear big brother!”

Somienna latched on to her father tearfully.

“B-but I must. Somienna, I must...” The duke’s sharpness wavered in the face of his beloved youngest daughter’s plea.

“I entreat you, too. Don’t execute anyone—”

I wanted to avoid a future where Sir Gouen’s wife and daughters couldn’t see him anymore.

He might still end up imprisoned or enslaved for life for his crimes, but that was better than death.

“Who the hell are you?!”

“Oh, didn’t I mention? I’m Nanashi the Hero of the Shiga Kingdom.”

Did I forget to introduce myself to the duke?

“Nanashi the Hero?! Then you’re the ancestral king Ya—”

“No, I’m not.”

I cut him off flatly before he could finish saying something stupid. He must have heard that from the king or the prime minister.

“I did save your life. Can’t you do me this favor?”

“Grrr, I suppose I must comply... I shall agree not to kill Gouen, then. But I’m afraid I cannot promise the life of Torriel after he incited rebellion against the Shiga Kingdom.”

It was weird to hear the duke suddenly being so polite.

“But, Father...”

“Somienna, this is the law of the kingdom.”

If it was a legal matter, maybe I shouldn’t get involved any further.

“Fine. But try to think of a way to punish your oldest son while sparing his life.”

“Very well.”

I was surprised that he agreed.

“Oh, Father, thank you!”

Somienna flung her arms around the duke.

Without letting go of him, she turned back and added, “Thanks to you, too, Mr. Hero!” with a big smile.

I used the High Wind spell to kick up a whirlwind, and then I had Arisa teleport me to a hidden area with Space Magic while they were distracted.

Hiding myself with a transparency cloak, I went back to the area where Satou had last been seen.

On the way, I used Magic Hand to rescue the people who’d been trapped under the rubble.

Then I positioned myself under some rubble, too, waited for Lady Helmina to come looking for me, and pretended to push my way free. Hopefully this would prevent anyone from suspecting that Nanashi the Hero and I were one and the same.

For some reason, when Lady Helmina saw me, her eyes widened. “No wonder they call you Pendragon the Untouchable.”

In all the commotion, I’d forgotten to make myself look injured.

“Well, that is my only redeeming quality.”

“Hee-hee. Surely there must be something else, right?”

Lady Helmina winked suggestively.

Somehow, it seemed a little forced.

“Oh, all right. I’ll treat you to some drinks and cooking sometime soon.”

“Thank you, Sir Pendragon.”

I’ll have to make it a good feast to cheer her up, since she’s putting on such a brave front.

Epilogue

“Satou here. Someone once said that it’s easier to start something than to end it. And that applies in a fantasy world, too...”

“You got a letter, master?”

“Yeah, from Ms. Helmina.”

As I was reading the letter in my study, Arisa and Mia came into the room, all dressed up.

I held up the letter from Lady Helmina of the Shiga Eight, showing it to them.

“Cheating?”

Mia puffed up her cheeks indignantly, but I deflated them with a poke.

“Don’t be silly. It’s about the attack at the duke’s mansion the other day.”

Sir Gouen had been dismissed from the Shiga Eight Swordsmen and sentenced to become a criminal slave; the letter said that he was officially being appointed as the head of the Violet unit, an army composed of criminal slaves from the royal capital, and being sent to assist with developing the Azure Lands.

Most judges and nobles had demanded the death penalty for his treason, but there were many who were reluctant to lose such a strong asset, hence the resulting sentence.

“Exile?” Arisa asked. “But won’t that rebellious son’s faction come to steal him away? You said so yourself, master. If you control the City Core, you can cancel a slave contract, can’t you?”

I nodded. “Yeah, which is why he won’t be sent out until after the situation with Vistall Duchy is resolved.”

In the meantime, Sir Gouen was being confined in a royal villa designed to imprison high-class nobles.

Just as I suspected, his wife and children had been held hostage to force him to attack the duke. That day, I went as Kuro to rescue them, and I'd brought them to the prime minister to take care of. They should be in the same villa as Sir Gouen now.

"What about the Shiga Eight leader? Did he have to resign?"

"No, he managed to avoid that."

There were demands that Sir Juleburg resign, too, but given his contributions to the kingdom thus far, and with the backing of the influential Marquis Kelten, he got off with only a salary cut and a loss of the right to appoint a new seat.

Since there had just recently been a demon attack in the royal capital, most people probably wanted to keep someone as strong and skillful as Sir Juleburg in a position to continue protecting them.

"Hmm. If this were Japan, the media and public opinions would probably have forced him into a one-two combo of an apology press conference and a resignation, I bet."

I chuckled dryly at Arisa's assessment.

"This?"

Mia pointed at a fancy-looking envelope decorated with gold leaf.

"That's a letter from Duke Vistall."

"Duke V.? Thanking you for the other day, I hope?"

"That part's mostly just an afterthought. He wants me to join his army."

He was sending out forces from the royal capital to Vistall Duchy to defeat the rebels sometime today.

The letter said that if I joined and made major contributions, I could at least become an honorary baronet, or maybe even an honorary baron. Even if that wasn't an obnoxiously empty promise, I wasn't interested in climbing the ranks anyway.

"They formed that army pretty fast."

Arisa raised her eyebrows as she read the departure date for the anti-rebel

army.

“He borrowed most of them from the kingdom’s standing army.”

Two squadrons of royal capital knights had been sent out as advance troops, with the infantry and supply wagons coming afterward.

The knight squadrons were carrying their provisions and water with Item Box users and Magic Bags.

“Huh. So what’s your reward?”

Arisa held out her hand for the letter, which I handed to her.

“Mrrr?”

Reading over Arisa’s shoulder, Mia furrowed her brow.

“A medal?”

“Basically, they need money to fight the rebels, so he wants to thank you with exposure.”

I didn’t really need a medal from Vistall Duchy, but it would be a serious insult to the duke to refuse. If I didn’t want to pick a fight with him, I had no choice but to accept.

What a pain. He was probably going to try to recruit me again when I accepted it.

But I was just going to refuse again anyway.



“Armyyy...?”

“Paraaade, sir!”

Leaning over the front rail of the open-air carriage, Tama and Pochi pointed at the street up ahead.

“That’s a knight squadron being sent to quash the rebellion in Vistall Duchy. Judging by the flags, it must be the Third Regiment of Knights,” the hired coachman explained.

Our group, Team Pendragon, was heading to the royal capital at His Majesty’s

invitation.

He said he wanted to congratulate us for defeating a floormaster.

According to the schedule I'd been given in advance, we would only actually meet the king in an audience room for a short time. Then the minister of the military, Marquis Kelten, would give each of us a medal, followed by a lavish luncheon in one of the dining halls of the castle. Per tradition, there would be a ball afterward as well.

Once the procession passed, we crossed the road and entered the upper nobles' district.

"You get a great view of the trees near the castle from here."

Arisa gazed up at the giant "Royal Sakura" tree that towered over the entire district.

Unfortunately, the flowers hadn't yet bloomed this year, but I'm sure the giant cherry blossom tree in full bloom next to the gorgeous white castle would make for an incredible view. I was told that it should bloom by New Year's Day at the latest, which I was definitely excited to see.

"What kinda treee...?"

"Mm, sakura," Mia responded.

We'd discussed it when we'd first arrived in the royal capital, but Tama and Pochi didn't seem to remember.

"Is sakura yummy, sir?"

"Sakuranbo fruit, yummy."

"I can't wait to try it, sir."

"Meee tooo...?"

Tama's and Pochi's eyes sparkled as they gazed up at the sakura tree.

"I didn't know sakura trees could get so big."

"Judging by the birdfolk soldiers flying nearby, it must be at least three hundred feet tall, I report."

As we chatted about the tree, we drew close to the castle gates.

“It looks even more impressive from close up,” Arisa remarked.

Liza nodded. “Yes, one can truly feel the majesty of nature.”

“Mrrr. World Tree.”

“Well, it’s not fair to compare it to that.”

“It may be smaller than a World Tree or the Mountain-Tree in the giants’ village, but this tree, too, is more than worthy of our admiration, don’t you agree?”

“Mrrrr...”

It was rare to hear Liza talk about anything but meat or battle, but her perspective seemed to be lost on Mia, since the latter had grown up in the shadow of the unreasonably massive World Tree.

Nana seemed to feel the same way, having been raised in the Cradle. Despite her lack of expression, she was tilting her head just like Mia.

“Were there any giant trees like that in your homeland, Liza?” Lulu asked.

“It wasn’t this enormous, but there was a large tree in the center of my village called the ‘Great Tree of Blessings’ that produced flowing water from its roots.”

As Liza responded, her eyes grew a little misty with nostalgia.

No wonder she sounded so passionate about admiring the Royal Sakura.

“Ooh, check out those hottie knights!”

Arisa shrieked as she looked up at the knight statues on either side of the castle gates.

They were more than sixty feet tall, and there were also golems like the stone statues protecting the eastern gate of Labyrinth City.

But instead of walking around and fighting like those golems, these golems seemed to be like stationary scarecrows that doubled as gun towers.

As we approached the gates, I felt a sensation like being scanned with the Practical Magic spell Sonar.

Tama was the only other one of us who seemed to notice, so it must have either been a fairly weak sensor or carefully disguised to avoid detection.

“They look just like the ‘Undefeatable Duo’ Raul and Suran from the shoujo manga ‘Teni X Hero,’” Arisa commented. “Maybe the ancestral king Yamato was actually a woman disguised as a man, too!”

“Arisa, don’t say that sort of thing in public. It’s considered heresy.”

I decided to tip the coachman later, since he was pretending not to have heard anything.

“I guess ‘Teni X Hero’ has appeal even in another world.”

“Were you a fan, too, Arisa?”

“Yeah, more or less. Why, you know it, master?”

“Yeah, one of my juniors at work used to read it a lot.”

What if my coworker who disappeared from work one day had actually wound up in this fantasy world, too...?

“Was this a female coworker?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Just answer.”

Arisa and Mia stared at me with frightening expressions.

“No, it was a guy who happened to like shoujo manga.”

“Phew.”

“Mm. Innocent.”

Arisa and Mia smiled. I patted their heads.

Ichirou...

As we passed through the gates to the castle, I thought I heard someone calling me by my real name.

I looked around, half expecting to see the mysterious stalker girl who showed up during my battle against Doghead, but unfortunately, I couldn’t find anyone.

“Something wrong, master?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

I patted Arisa on the back and smiled reassuringly.

“Dooove...?”

“Coo-coo, sir.”

Tama and Pochi looked up at a pigeon that had taken off from a knight statue’s head.

“Would a dove’s cry not be ‘co-coo-coo’? I inquire.”

“Mrrr. Co-woo.”

“It’s coo-coo, sir.”

“Wrooong...? Coooo...”

I smiled at the healing sights and sounds of my kids imitating birds.

Things had been pretty hectic for a while now, but hopefully we could finally get to some peaceful sightseeing in the royal capital without any more interruptions.

Hopefully, any further disasters could wait until the New Year.



Far to the northeast of the royal capital of the Shiga Kingdom, there was a giant temple atop a sacred mountain that divided the east and west of the kingdom.

“There you are, Mito.”

“Hey there, Sky.”

A beautiful young girl with silver hair down to her ankles called out to a black-haired young woman in simple villager’s clothing.

The sharp-eyed girl with the silver hair had bat-like silver wings on her back.

“Looks like you finished making the transfer.”

“Indeed. It feels strange to be in such a body after several hundred years.”

The silver-haired girl moved her arms and legs experimentally, then looked at Mito. “So, have you decided where to start searching?”

“Mm, not yet.”

“Shiga Kingdom is rather large to search for a single human without any leads, is it not?”

“I think it’ll be fine.” Mito gazed out at the sea of clouds beneath them. “I don’t have any leads, but the goddess of the shrine told me so.”

“That goddess from your world... Ama-no-Mizuhana-hime, was it?”

“Yes, she’s the deity of my family’s shrine. She said that I would be able to meet him again when I woke up from my artificial slumber.”

“If it is a god’s prediction, then it must be true.”

“...Yeah.” Mito nodded, looking a little embarrassed to have the silver-haired girl reassure her.

“A dove...?”

The silver-haired girl looked down through the clouds.

The shrine where they were standing was high above the clouds, where no ordinary bird would ever fly.

“Yep, it’s a dove.” Mito gazed at it with a smile. “Come here...”

She held out her hands and caught the bird as delicately as a treasure.

As the bird cooed in her arms, she looked at its feathers.

“No doubt about it. This is the alert rune I put on the Raul and Suran statues.”

“Mito?”

“C’mon, Sky,” Mito said brightly. “Let’s go to the royal capital.”

“All right. Want to ride on my back?”

“Just to the bottom of the mountain would be fine. I’ll get a wild runosaur to take me the rest of the way after that.”

“But I’d be much faster...,” the silver-haired girl grumbled, resentful of this plan.

“Yeah, yeah. I know you’re faster than anyone else.”

Mito smiled, still looking out toward the royal capital.

“Wait for me, Ichirou.”

Afterword

Hello, I'm Hiro Ainana.

Thank you very much for picking up volume 16 of *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*!

It's thanks to the support of all you readers that I'm able to keep putting out volumes like this.

I'll try to make things even more interesting as time goes on, so I hope you'll continue to follow along.

Now, for those of you who read the afterword to decide whether to buy the book, let's discuss the highlights of this volume.

Satou and company have finally reached the royal capital after a long and arduous journey.

They plan to do some fun sightseeing in the royal capital until the kingdom meeting at the end of the year—but of course, that gets thrown into chaos because of Mr. Juleburg, the leader of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, who appeared in the epilogue of the previous volume.

I'm sure many readers of the web version were surprised that Juleburg is now challenging Satou to a duel instead of Liza.

But don't worry. Liza's big scene is definitely still here.

Of course, everything leading up to that scene is newly written for this volume. I hope fans of the web version will still get plenty of enjoyment out of it, too.

There's also some exciting scenes where Satou shows the Shiga Eight just a little bit of his true power, which I hope you'll look forward to. If you read it again once or twice, it can be fun to approach that scene from the perspective of the characters who are watching Satou. Please do give it a try!

As usual, there are plenty of changes from the web version. Just like how the middle-aged male gun user of the Shiga Eight, who was killed in battle, has been replaced by Ms. Helmina, and how the katana user Bauen the “Wind Blade” has been replaced with a new character. A very muscly one. I’m confident that I made him a very charming muscle—I mean, character—so I hope all you readers will come to like him, too.

We’ll also finally be reunited with those girls who we parted ways with back in volume 2.

Even I wasn’t expecting it to take more than ten volumes to see them again.

What names will they be given after their reunion, how will they interact with Satou and the others, and what will their next goal become? You’ll have to read the book to find out.

Since there are so many brand-new scenes in this volume, I hope even fans of the web version will feel like they’re enjoying a new story.

I wanted to wrap up the highlights here, but I’m sure some of you are asking, “Who in the world is the little girl in the color frontispiece?!”

The little girl with her trademark ribbons on the front page there is Duke Vistall’s youngest daughter, Somienna.

At first, she had just a small role in the tour of the airship, but she ended up getting more screen time in this volume, to the point where she even won the coveted color frontispiece illustration.

Inspired by shri’s adorable art of her, I even ended up getting overexcited and rewriting the latter part a bit. Art really is a powerful thing.

But it’ll ruin the fun if I write any more spoilers. Let’s wrap up the overview of volume 16 here.

Before the thank-yous, I’d like to make one announcement.

Volume 8 of Aya Megumu’s manga adaptation of *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody* should be coming out around the same time as this light novel volume.

Karina finally makes her appearance in the manga version!

Whether you're a Karina fan or not, please be sure to take a look. Karina's wonderful in the novels, but the manga Karina is extremely adorable, too.

Finally, the usual round of thanks and shout-outs!

I can never thank my two editors A-san and I-san enough. Not only do they give incredibly specific advice and corrections, but they even pick up on plot holes and contradictions that I surely would have missed. I would absolutely be lost without them. Thank you so much, both of you—I hope I can keep counting on your guidance far into the future.

As always, I have endless gratitude to shri for giving color and life to the world of Death March with such enchanting illustrations. I can always depend on you for the visual aspect of the Death March world.

Of course, I also want to thank the Kadokawa Books editorial staff and everyone else who's involved in the production, sales, marketing, distribution, and multimedia aspects of this book.

And finally, the biggest of thanks to all of you, the readers!

Thank you so much for reading this book all the way to the end!

I hope to see you again next volume, for the chaos in the royal capital arc!

Hiro Ainana

THE Eminence IN Shadow

ONE BIG FAT LIE

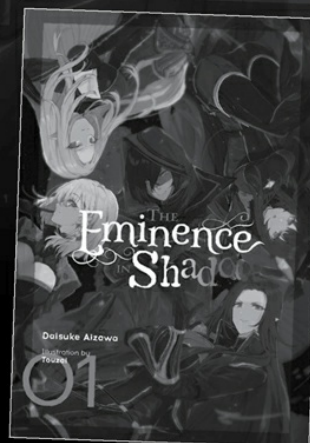
AND A FEW TWISTED TRUTHS

Even in his past life, Cid's dream wasn't to become a protagonist or a final boss. He'd rather lie low as a minor character until it's prime time to reveal he's a mastermind...or at least, do the next best thing—pretend to be one! And now that he's been reborn into another world, he's ready to set the perfect conditions to live out his dreams to the fullest. Cid jokingly recruits members to his organization and makes up a whole backstory about an evil cult that they need to take down. Well, as luck would have it, these imaginary adversaries turn out to be the real deal—and everyone knows the truth but him!



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